Knights of the Dawning Alliance
by brightephemera

Summary

Sith Warrior Ruth wakes up into an AU where her friends, family, and even enemies have scattered across the galaxy. They begin to converge on the trail of the royal family of Zakuul, and Ruth must marshal a coalition of friends and rivals to take back her life...or failing that, build a new one. This narrative of struggle, passion, and interdependence centers on the Sith Warrior/Theron Shan) with, in descending order of prominence, Imperial Agent/Lana Beniko), Jedi Knight, Jedi Consular, Sith Inquisitor, Bounty Hunter, Smuggler, and Republic Trooper, in Knights of the Fallen Empire/Knights of the Eternal Throne.

Notes

KotDA is a significant revision of an older Knights AU on another site. Say Knights ten times fast.
She Chose Hope

Book 1: Waking

(Ruth, Pierce, Darth Marr, Valkorion, Arcann, Vaylin, Lana, Teeseven, Koth, Senya)

In which we see the Emperor’s Wrath at work, the Wrath is captured by the forces of the Eternal Empire, the Emperor haunts, an unexpected rescue occurs at an inopportune time, and Ruth and her rescuers meet new allies from Zakuul.

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15 ATC – 4 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Ruth hewed down the last of the Republic guard and proceeded slowly up the dais, her two red lightsabers cutting arcs to either side as she went. The chancellor on his great seat shrank back.

“Lord Chancellor,” she said in a ringing voice. Behind her she knew Major Pierce was keeping his blaster ready. In all this time, only he had not abandoned her.

The people in the galleries cowered and stayed silent. “I’ve come to give you the chance,” she announced, “to reconsider your very impolite response to the Empire’s offer of protection.”

“You tyrants just want our crystals, and will give nothing in return,” said the Chancellor. “I will not…”

She stuck a lightsaber in front of his face. She hardly needed the Force or her blank black and silver mask to cloud his mind with menace. “You won’t,” she echoed for the audience, “will you?”

“I will not be bullied,” he said, gulping.

“Very well. You’ll be replaced.” She ran him through with both sabers at once.

Once she would have pitied him. Once she was stupid. She pulled the body out of the chair and let it lie. “Next?” she called. “Quickly.”

“My lord,” said a little woman, clattering into view and at once seeming to regret it. She curtseyed deeply. “It would be my honor to sign a treaty with the Empire.”

Ruth smiled behind her mask. Her master the Sith Emperor had betrayed her, vanishing in a torrent of death only eight months previously, but through strength and determination she had kept her title. She could be hard enough, just watch. As the Wrath, defender of the Empire, she stood equal to the Dark Council. The political deals she struck would be honored. It was a murky sort of distinction but in this anchorless world it was enough to go on. “It will be my pleasure to dictate terms.”

Her holo made a diffident beep. Ruth gestured for Pierce to manage the scene. She herself walked behind the chair. “Busy,” she said. But just in case it was her toddler son back on Dromund Kaas, she listened.

It was not her son. “My lord,” said the informant. “A mystery force has attacked Korriban. Nobody can account for where they came from or where they’re going.”
“Ah.” Then she already knew her next task. “I’m on my way.”

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The Eternal Fleet raids Empire and Republic alike, overtaking all but the most modern ships and raining destruction at will. Months into the lopsided struggle, the Fleet descends on Darth Marr’s flagship, stronghold of the Dark Council…

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The boarding action was perfectly synchronized, something Ruth would admire if she weren’t swimming in its effects. She and Darth Marr had been caught on the bridge. Now they fought toward retreat. Their weaponry couldn’t sustain this space battle, not for much longer. And as for the boarders…the Eternal Fleet fielded armored clones, or close enough to them, that fought with eerie precision in their bladed lightstaves. Between them ran squad after squad of battle droids armed with yellow blasters.

Ruth spoke for her comm. “Pierce. Status.”

His voice crackled back. “Messy, milord. If you’re going to get to Scorned we’d better go.”

Ruth looked around. Darth Marr spent every instant in graceful, horrifyingly final motion. But new bodies kept running up even as the old ones fell. “Get the others out,” she said to Pierce.

That noise must have been a scoff. “And the two most important people on the ship? Heroic last stand isn’t your color, milord. On my way.”

“It won’t be a last–”

Pain, white.

*

Ruth raised her aching head and looked around. She was lying on a narrow cot in a sterile black room. She still had the mask of the Wrath on. Shackles weighed down her wrists with more than just physical burden. Her heart fluttered. Not many people had the means of restraining Force users. It was in every Force user’s best interest to assure a horrible death for anyone who tried developing the technology.

Proof once more that the Eternal Empire didn’t play by the rules.

Guards, more identical suits of golden armor, walked in and grabbed her elbows. She tried to shake a chin-length lock of hair back toward the edge of her mask’s skullcap as she stumbled between them down a grand hallway. Either they had bigger ships than the Fleet standard, or she was on a planet somewhere.

People fell in behind her. Her shackles seemed to sap the very life from her arms. If she got her hands out, she would have to kill a lot of people with her brain or a stolen implement, very fast.

Someone behind her prodded her back. She jerked forward to stand beside a similarly bound Darth Marr on a long narrow bridge over…something needlessly dramatic.

She swallowed and didn’t look down.
She was in a land she did not know, in a room she did not know, before a throne she did not know…but she knew the bearded man standing above her. She knew him as surely as she had once felt his presence in her own mind, scant months ago, back when she was the Emperor’s Wrath and he was…he was…

“You do not have to stand against me,” he said in a voice like the only certainty in this life. He eyed her and the shackled Sith beside her clinically. “Instead, you can kneel.”

Darth Marr growled. “I will never again kneel to you!”

“Marr,” cautioned Ruth. From their years in authority they respected one another. She had more sense than to try to curb him…much.

The Emperor, the one who now called himself Valkorion, who had invaded his own former Empire with the forces of a land called Zakuul, tilted his head. “You would sooner die than acknowledge my superiority?”

“Never again!” The huge Sith twisted and seized the weapon of one of the long honor guard flanking the sole path to the throne. Ruth watched before committing. He knocked two men off the edge, flattened a third…before the Emperor raised his hand. The power in the room vibrated. Ruth lurched aside. A torrent of lightning burst from the Emperor’s outstretched hand. And Ruth, for the first time, saw something that her colleague could not defeat. The storm landed. Marr crumpled. The Force-edged shriek was almost enough to conceal the entry of someone else…a woman, young, not unlike Ruth in build and confidence.

“Clear the room,” the newcomer shouted, and the guards left their posts and filed out. Ruth found herself alone with her master, a stranger, and a corpse.

“You choose differently,” said Valkorion, as calmly as though the last thirty seconds hadn’t happened.

Ruth inclined her head. Once, she had taken his orders. Once, the place of the Empire had been clear. Once, it had all made sense. Sure, the Emperor was reputed to have taken millions of lives in a final rampage prior to his disappearance…but who would really do that? They were rumors, and he was a truth, now. One that could bring back the simplicity of her early career.

“In all my centuries,” he said, “you alone have merited my full attention. You leave your mark upon the galaxy wherever you act, just as I do.”

Praise in his voice sounded good. “As we did, my lord.”

“Look around you. Zakuul is poised to become the greatest civilization in the history of the galaxy. I have formed this empire to surmount all of my previous works. To span eternity. The Eternal Throne commands a fleet more vast than any ever built. It has the power to reshape the galaxy into any image that I choose. That we choose. I will share all of this with you…if you will only kneel.”

No more politics. No more questions. No more doubt. What few allies she had, hadn’t saved her. Every friend she’d ever had had betrayed her…but her master might not.

She chose hope, and went to one knee. “My lord.”

He waved his hand and her shackles sprang open. She felt her sense of the Force livening as they fell. It was rich in this place, dizzying, darker than she had ever partaken of. Why had she fought it for so long?
The Emperor raised his hand, and the Force stream was a caress. It pulled at her insides, roiling, tugging, leaving something ineffable in its wake. She could die for that feeling. She wondered, distantly, whether she would.

Someone stepped out of the shadows. “You are fortunate, Outlander,” he said. “I struggled for years, sacrificed everything – even the life of my brother – trying to earn such an invitation.” The words washed over her without meaning. “You have done what I could not. In exchange, I will do what you could not.”

He drew his lightsaber. Ruth brought up her hand, slowly, dreamily, still wrapped in the Emperor’s Force concentration.

And the Zakuulian prince stabbed his father in the back.

The Emperor looked down at the yellow blade protruding from his chest. He laughed. The Force cloud around Ruth spread, whirled around the room, and burst in a deafening shock. Everyone remaining sprawled out flat, with the Emperor’s body falling last of all.

Ruth lay desolate. The presence was gone, and she was just as empty as before.

Someone walked in. The prince took up a commanding pose. “The Outlander has assassinated our Emperor,” he said loudly. “Guards, come.”

He walked up to Ruth and lowered himself just enough to rip off her mask. He looked on her naked face and laughed. “Take her away.”

And the shackles went back on. Ruth tried to shake off her lethargy and couldn’t. Guards grabbed her elbows. She looked up at the prince.

He looked down at her, his mask hiding half his face, his remaining eye gleaming orange. “We will meet again,” he said. “And on that day I will show you the wreckage of your homeworld.”

*  

The Emperor’s son Arcann has Ruth cast in carbonite…

Valkorion is not dead: his voice still haunts Ruth in her long sleep. He drags her through battles, testing her mettle, and ultimately says she must deal with his children Arcann and Vaylin, her witnesses in her last waking moments.

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Ruth dreamed.

Everything was still, blurred at the edges, caught in motion. Ruth stood on a precipice and watched a space battle, one in which Republic and Empire alike were bursting into coronas the color of blood.

“I have always loved the stars.” The voice was deep and commanding. The presence – the presence beside her could be no one but the Emperor. He wore Valkorion’s face. Perhaps that was his true face. Perhaps he had simply chosen never to show her, in past years when she did his bidding. She had worn a mask, too; it seemed only fair.
“Not dead, then?” she said.

“Not dead.” He paused. “You have earned my respect. I followed you here so we might speak undisturbed.”

Her head hurt. It seemed vitally important to ask him, to ask him something. They had never made conversation, not when she was his servant. “The things you’ve done…”

“You focus too much on the past,” Valkorion said patiently. “All things progress.”

“And me?”

“You? Are dying.”

Not lying still. Not like this. “No. My son. Who’s going to–”

“He is beyond your reach. Sooner or later most children are. The carbon freezing – for you are frozen in carbonite, at my son’s command – was imperfect. Your body is poisoned, and will only degrade the longer you are frozen. I doubt your friends realize it yet. At the same time, you’ve barely tapped your true potential. It is time you were unleashed.”

“The only leash I ever wore was yours.”

He laughed, soft and deep. “Then perhaps it is time it was removed.”

Something stung Ruth’s temples. She squeezed her eyes shut and when she opened them again she was outside the Citadel on Dromund Kaas. Smoke rose all around. Its banners were torn, its windows burning.

She stepped forward, mouth open. The heat of the ruins breathed in her face. Valkorion’s voice arrested her. “Our failed Empire,” he said. “You were always superior to the murderous fools in charge here.”

“I tried to show them reason.” The reason of the hard survivor: no trust, not for people like that, but at least rationality. She had tried.

“Do not waste time. This Empire is not worth saving, and the Republic is not worth destroying. There is a greater purpose awaiting us.”

“Destruction? Again? Like Korriban?” Like…her mind shied away from the other one, the one people blamed him for.

“You cannot stop what is to come. Save yourself.”

The dream shifted. The voice faded. Ruth thought of distant things, but could not summon them to vision.

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November, 20 ATC – 9.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath

Ruth was cold, and when she opened her aching eyes she could not see. Someone was speaking in a muffled voice. Then, black agony in her chest, and she fell.

Her raw hands and smarting knees kept her from the floor. Desperate for sight, for anything, she
scrambled to a crouch. “Who goes there?” Her voice was terrifyingly weak.

“That wasn’t quite so bad,” came a familiar voice.

“All right,” said Ruth. “You have Lana Beniko’s voice. What else have you got?”

“The rest of her,” the person said with an unmistakable low-key humor. “You’re not dying right this instant. We still have quite a ways to go.”

Lana had been an ally in the matter of the Revanite conspiracy only a year ago. She was competent, friendly. And, apparently, here. “I don’t understand. How did…? I was in Zakuul’s throne room. Did you…? The war? Did we win?”

“I can explain once we’re clear. We really don’t have much time.”

Something beeped. Ruth stiffened.

“He’s one of ours,” Lana said hurriedly. “And yes, Teeseven, we are saving her.”

More beeping, somewhat hysterical.

“She killed…who? There’s no time for this. Now. Ruth. The Republic and Empire have all but fallen to the man who imprisoned you. You and I are going to do something about that.”

Ruth flexed her hands. Now that some feeling other than pain was returning to them she was itching for a lightsaber. Lana took her elbow. “Careful. Don’t strain yourself.”

She had no mask. She had no gloves. She had no weapon. As the Emperor’s Wrath she was making a poor showing. They left the nightmarish prison block, blurred to Ruth’s eyes, and raced to the painful light of the outdoors.

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Together they fight their way to where pilot Koth Vortena is ready to pick them up. A reactor is damaged in the battle; Ruth flees rather than deal with it.

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They didn’t speak again until they were on board a small escape ship that wasn’t doing a good job of escaping. “What do you remember?” said Lana.

“I was with Darth Marr on an attack on the Zakuul Empire’s fleet. We sensed the Emperor there. Our Emperor, Lana. Isn’t that strange? I hadn’t felt him since Yavin IV.”

“I’m sure you sensed Ziost.”

Ruth frowned and continued. “The Eternal Fleet surrounded us. My ship got away with Pierce, I hope, but I stayed behind to fight. I had to take at least one of them with me. The ship was falling apart but we managed to ram it into the nearest Eternal vessel. Then…it went white for a while. I was bound. The masked prince was there. He brought me to his father. The Emperor. He called himself Valkorion. His voice….,” Ruth sat up straighter, realizing. “Darth Marr is dead, isn’t he.”

“Yes.”

“He defied the Emperor to the end. I…” Did not. She remembered well. In the fatigue or relief of
finding her master again, something above the chaotic betrayals that her life had fallen into, she had agreed to kneel. “The Emperor tried to do something to me. He didn’t succeed. The prince attacked him.”

“Emperor-Prince Arcann did? Fascinating. They said you were the one who killed the Immortal Emperor.”

“No. I saw him fall…then it was dark. Oh…oh, no. My son. Where is Rylon?”

“Your son? Um…”

The darkness in her vision cleared, to no good effect. The unfamiliar shuttle around her was utterly beside the point. “My child! He’s three years old! Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long was I out?”

“We don’t have to go into this now.”

“We damn well do. How long?”

Lana looked her in the eye. “Five years.”

“No.” It came out as a whimper. The world closed around her, and every single part of it was changed. “We need to get out of here.”

“Working on it,” called the pilot. “Hang on tight.”

Princess Vaylin nearly intercepts the ship, and damages it; it is forced to land in the swamp beneath the city…

A replacement ship presents itself in ruins: the Gravestone, supposedly capable of taking out one of the Eternal Fleet. Ruth, with assassin droid HK-55, helps Lana, T7-01, and Koth repair and supply the Gravestone.

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“Uh, Koth,” said Ruth.

“Uh, yeah,” said the Zakuulian pilot and ex-soldier Koth. Well, Lana vouched for him, at least. It was possible that someone in this entire Empire wasn’t crazy.

“You really think,” she said, “that this ship is going to be firing anything based on the efforts of three people and a pair of droids who are only programmed to spout threats and recriminations, respectively?”

“Oh, is that you Teeseven keeps grumbling about?”

“Yes. Apparently I killed Republic figures in my past life.” Ruth rubbed her temples. “Who knew?”

“Ancient history, I hope. Don’t worry about the Gravestone. She’ll be firing all engines plus your new favorite weapon,” said Koth. “Scout’s honor.”

“What does that mean?”
“It means, hand me that hydrospanner. Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

Sure, guy she met twelve hours ago. “Here.”

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**Valkorion’s presence persists in Ruth’s head.**

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“Did you sleep last night?” said Lana.

“Yes,” lied Ruth. “You?”

“Surprisingly well.”

“Good. We need to be alert...Lana, who are we waiting for?” Ruth looked around the marsh. She looked back at the miserable-looking vessel that Koth was still working to render spaceworthy. She looked at the swamp animals that Lana’s HK-55 was gunning down to pass the time. It was a strange rescue party. Possibly about to get stranger.

“An ally,” said Lana. “It turns out people from all walks of life are willing to join us.”

Ruth saw a figure approaching. It wore the uniform armor that had menaced Ruth and Lana every step of the path here. “Including Knights of Zakuul?” she said dryly.

“Exactly.”

The armored figure took off her helmet to reveal a woman maybe fifteen years Ruth’s senior, with a gemmed forehead that reminded Ruth of the woman she had seen in the Zakuul throne room. It must be fashionable. “You came,” the stranger said levelly.

“So did you,” said Lana. “Senya, this is Ruth Niral, the Outlander. Ruth, Senya Tirall of the Knights of Zakuul.”

“Outlander,” said Ruth. “Arcann used that term. What is it supposed to mean?”

“You’re an outsider to us,” said Senya. “And important enough to require a title for the sound bites.”

Five years ago she would have been the Emperor’s Wrath. Until the Emperor came roaring back in...but even so, hadn’t she submitted to be his once again? But the Prince was on the throne, and the Sith Empire was bereft, and maybe she had run out of Emperors to serve.

“I won’t complain about your help,” said Ruth, “but I’m surprised you’re giving it.”

She frowned. “Not all of us blindly follow Arcann.”

Something made a sound. In fact, it made a thumping series of sounds. Ruth readied the lightsaber Lana had given her. Marching through the black and mossy trees came a series of people armored as Senya was, each wielding a yellow saber or polearm.

“Take this,” said Lana, pressing an unfamiliar lightsaber into Ruth’s hand.

“If they’re sending this many they know full well we’re here,” said Ruth. “I hope Koth’s ready.”
“Stow the chatter,” said Senya. “Prove you can fight.”

Ruth reached for the Force and it was there. The darkness lay waiting for her, and she swept it up and whirled into action. It was a cold focus she used, not the blazing excesses of the addict. She felt Lana’s Dark Side presence beside her, and a discipline that was hard to identify in Senya. Whatever it was, there was a lot of it.

The wave broke on the three lightsabers. Ruth wanted to watch her companions. Lana had proved her mettle on Yavin years ago, but time had passed and things could have changed. And Senya… no one knew what she was capable of. But Ruth didn’t have time to study. They were wildly outnumbered, and the enemy was systematically isolating the three defenders. Ruth slashed her way back toward Lana, meaning to cover her back and knowing she wouldn’t be granted the quarter to do so.

She felt the stab as if it were in her own side.

The world dimmed. Distant things grew sharper, near things more blurred. The battle stopped. Valkorion stepped into her field of view in a purple glow, eyeing Lana and the yellow blade under her arm. “Your Sith ally is outmatched.” He paused. “I could save her. I only require the briefest moment of control.”

It wasn’t even a question. She couldn’t face this new world without her old ally. Once, her master’s strength had been in her arm. “Do it.”

“Gladly.”
The Hero You Wanted

Chapter Summary

Ruth accepts an offer of help; Lana and friends learn about Ruth's infestation; SCORPIO joins the escape; Ruth faces Arcann; the party reaches Odessen and picks up another old friend. (Ruth, Lana, Valkorion, Senya, Koth, SCORPIO, Arcann, T7-01, Theron).

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A vast will seized Ruth in its jaws, mastery over the Dark Side all around her. A moment of ecstasy shattered into an expanding wave of power, knocking her enemies down, stripping the life from them as it went.

As she returned to herself she panicked. She ran for Lana. Only when she saw the Sith breathing did she start to relax. No price to be paid today, then. She would keep that in mind.

Lana stood, staring. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” said Ruth. “How’s Senya?”

“Alive,” Senya said, rising gracefully to her feet. “Who’s left?”

“Just us three,” said Lana. “I don’t know what happened here. But I don’t care to wait around for it to happen again. Let’s get back to Koth.”

“You realize the moment we reach hyperspace I’m plotting a course for my son.”

“Son?” Senya raised her eyebrows, eyeing Ruth. “He must be very young.”

“He was when I left him.” Ruth turned away.

* 

Together the party takes the Gravestone into orbit…and into battle, where it lays waste to the Eternal Fleet. The Gravestone then escapes to hyperspace.

The party shelters in Asylum, where they meet a mechanic named Tora. Senya leads Ruth to her allies, Scions, Force users who see visions.

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Ruth staggered. The lack of sleep was starting to bother her. But sleep brought with it too much risk, too much lost time. With some focus, some careful Force use, she could make up for it.

She stopped walking. She was still surrounded by visionaries, these friends of Senya’s, these Scions. The vision quest was less productive than most. The Scions were more upset that they couldn’t read her than they were willing to help.
And yet, in the clarity of fighting, they saw the Emperor’s presence in Ruth’s mind. And, worse, they spoke of it.

Lana had arrived late to the trial. Now she looked stricken. “No. That’s not possible. You should have told me. I deserved to know.”

Ruth mentally cursed the strangers. “Lana, there are things I trust you with, and then there’s this. He’s wrapped around my brain. That’s not casual conversation.”

“Nothing about this is casual!”

Ruth kept her chin up. “You know now.”

“This is great,” said Koth. “If the Emperor is still alive in her, Zakuul can still be saved.”

“The Emperor remains a threat to all life,” Lana said shortly.

“His reach is limited,” said Ruth.

“Like the explosion before we took off? That kind of limit?”

“I used him. I’d do it again. On my terms. It’s under control.”

The Scions shifted and whispered. Senya stopped her pacing. “There is one truth left to reveal,” she said. “I withheld the true reason I followed you through the trials. The reason was to understand the Outlander who will destroy Arcann and Vaylin…my son and daughter.”

Valkorion arrested the scene. “Haha, she told you! How delightful! Ahaha…”

Ruth reeled as her plans sagged into one another and crashed. “Your children. I’m fighting your children.”

“Yes.”

“How can you…are you here to stop me?”

Senya was perfectly calm. “No. I meant everything I said before. They must be stopped.”

“Senya, I’m not very good at leaving enemies alive.” Ruth swallowed. “But I will try.”

“Don’t. It would only be a distraction. And you will not survive being distracted around Arcann.”

Senya shifted her stance. “Shall we go?”

Ruth looked back at the lead Scion. “Is that all the insight the Scions have for me? Telling my allies what was better left unsaid?”

He scowled. “ Darkness follows you. You may shelter in it, as long as you don’t mind the corruption you’re resting in.”

“Thanks,” said Ruth. Disgusting, but they probably meant well. If only good intentions could help her where she was going.

* 

The Lady of Sorrows had cultists, which was the first strike against her. But Ruth wanted this mysterious potential ally’s connections in the Zakuulian underworld. It took only a few short
interrogations to get them a holo to the majordomo, and an invitation to the door. Koth and Senya followed Ruth in.

The headquarters was cleaner than Ruth had suspected based on the path to entry. It was a spacious office with a wide window out onto the lower levels of Zakuulian civilization. The Nautolan majordomo was waiting attentively to one side. And in the center of the room was…a droid. Shaped like a woman, more or less, with heavy structural elements and eyes whose false irises glowed orange.

She turned toward Ruth and tilted her head. “Outlander…Ruth Niral. Noted. ‘Very young.’ ‘Devastating in field.’ ‘Devastating.’ ‘I hope she makes it.’ I have my former associate’s notes on you. Personally my program has not developed an appreciation for the female sex. I imagine it would only enrich between the lines.”

Ruth shook her head, hard. She could still stand upright but after more long hours of effort it was difficult to concentrate. “What are you?” she said dully.

The droid’s mouth moved, a complicated little apparatus and more expressive than Ruth was used to. “An intelligence beyond your comprehension. You may address me as SCORPIO.”

“How do you know me? Who was your former associate?”

“Irrelevant. I have come to Zakuul to further my heuristic directive of self-improvement. This self-iteration is number one one three eight. The proposal put forth by your colleague intrigues me enough that I have decided to accompany you.” She nodded toward Senya.

“Wait,” said Ruth, “as in, leave Zakuul and come with us?”

“That is what I said.”

“I thought a contact in the Zakuul underworld would be useful in place.”

“Then use my servants. I derive no more benefit here. So I will accompany you.” Something in her metallic neck shifted. “Do not make me repeat myself again.”

“I take it your last few iterations didn’t focus on social skills.” Apparently she got sarcastic when she was tired.

SCORPIO looked to her majordomo. “Continue operations in my stead. I will remain in touch.”

Koth looked to Ruth. “Guess you convinced her.”

Senya was frowning. “I don’t think we had to. She’s…unlike any machine I’ve ever come across.”

Ruth stood and glared. So did SCORPIO. Finally Ruth started for the door. “You realize there are certain guarantees I require before you come with us.”

“I will require an interface with the Gravestone,” SCORPIO said coolly. “I look forward to communicating with an intellect that rivals my own for a change.”

“So you talk to the Gravestone and improve yourself. What does that get me?”

SCORPIO walked with her into the ill-favored alley beyond. “I will assist you in your fight against Arcann. He has something of mine. The severity of his error must be recognized.”

“Which is why you’re dictating terms to me. Something people as a rule can’t do.”
Her eyes flashed. “Can’t I? You are so far a very small rebellion. You should be grateful.”

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Senya’s allies the Scions are slaughtered by Arcann in a trap while Zakuul troops raid Asylum, where the Gravestone had taken shelter.

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“He was always good to Zakuul,” Koth said, on the way up to the control panel suspended high above the docks. He was always good to Zakuul. That one rumor of one isolated planet aside, the Emperor had been good for a long time to the Sith Empire, too. He had been. If Ruth didn’t believe that, her career since her teenage years was worth nothing.

But now she was facing his son, Koth was out of the way, and Arcann was making noise.

He thrust his lightsaber past her guard, laughed as she struggled to dodge. “I can’t wait to meet all your friends,” he said loudly.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” Ruth swung back, harried him with blows more quick than heavy. They were evenly matched in brute force; she had to evade, not overpower, his defenses. Adrenaline was soaking up fatigue as fast as it could, and starting to fail. “What friends?” she said, and pressed hard. She hadn’t asked for this. She hadn’t asked for any of this. Lana was the only person in this mess she even knew, and that acquaintance had always been strictly professional. On both sides.

“Oh,” laughed Arcann, “so the Outlander stands alone? Someone should tell the people dying for your flagship as we speak.”

The world shifted and stilled. Ruth couldn’t see Valkorion but she heard his deep voice. “My son is too strong. You need my power. Only together can we strike him down.”

Her arms trembled, and no other friends were in sight. “Do it,” she said, and almost said “master.”

It was the feeling she had felt when he reached to her in the throne room. It was the ecstasy she had felt in the swamp, surrounded by people so small, so inconsequential. And it burst into real time in a purple symphony that knocked Arcann’s lightsaber clear of his hand and sent him reeling off the edge of the Spire platform. Lurching through her own new emptiness Ruth ran forward just to watch him fall into the murk.

“If you’re coming,” Lana said in Ruth’s ear. Ruth shook herself. “Do I bother thanking you?” she said to the quiet around her. No one answered.

She picked up Koth from where he had been standing guard and piled into the shuttle that they took back to the Gravestone’s dock. Above, the Eternal Fleet hung in the clouds like spiked knuckles in the atmosphere’s velvet glove. The nearest ones were streaming fire at the Gravestone’s dock.

“Hyperspace?” said Ruth.

“Preparing,” said SCORPIO.

“Ready to punch it,” said Koth.

“Where’s Senya?” said Ruth.
On cue the woman tottered onto the bridge. “I was delayed,” she said flatly. “Vaylin is still alive.”

“Ah,” said Ruth. “Then we have one out of two.”

Senya’s eyes shuttered. “I see.”

“I’m sorry. He didn’t give me much choice.” Which ‘he,’ she wasn’t going to mention.

“At least,” said Senya, “his reign is over. I really thought I would have felt it.”

“Do we have his body?” said Lana.

“No,” said Ruth. “He fell.”

“One fall might not be enough to kill him. I imagine we’ll find out soon enough. Meanwhile, Ruth, we have a destination. Everyone’s waiting for us on a planet named Odessen. If you’re feeling up to it, we should say hello.”

Ruth sagged against the railing. “Of course.”

*

The astromech droid rolled onto the bridge right around then. It rolled up to Ruth and beeped furiously.

“I don’t speak droid,” she said tiredly.

“He says you’re a monster,” said Lana. “You killed many good Jedi and three Senators who were only defending their people.”

Ruth glared. “If I am to be held accountable for the actions I took as a defender of the Empire, you’ll have to get a better prosecutor than a droid.”

T7-01 squealed and rolled off, its little astromech head twisting wildly side to side.

“I think you hurt his feelings,” said Lana.

“If I’m the monster he sees me as, he should be grateful he’s got anything left to hurt.” Ruth rubbed her neck and sighed. “How many Imperials do you think he’s contributed to shooting out of the sky?”

“I’m not sure it’s wise to keep score,” said Lana.

“My thoughts exactly.”

*

*Lana Beniko has been busy: her alliance of Imperial and Republic forces are building a base. Odessen will be, for the foreseeable future, home.*

*

Odessen was one earsplitting confusion. Ruth was aware that Lana Beniko expected her presence and support. Ruth wasn’t sure she realized just what she was asking.
The past ten days had been, in short, hell. Awakened from clumsily applied carbonite freeze; broken from her prison only to find that the galaxy had bent the knee to the tyrannical Eternal Empire. Ruth, too, had knelt once. The Emperor’s own son had killed the Emperor and laid the blame on her. Now she had no one. No simple service. No reassurance that the benefactor of the Eternal Empire would bring the Sith Empire back under his wing in good time and good order. No reassurance at all.

And now he was in her head, talking to her.

The recovery of the Gravestone was a blur. Ruth fought when people came to hurt her, and worked when orders came to direct her, and the rest of the time searched in herself for directions to the only person left who mattered: her son. Her meditations had so far borne no fruit.

She did not sleep. If she slept she wasn’t sure when or whether she would wake up again. The Force would sustain her past what willpower alone could reach. And, if it came to it, Emperor Valkorion’s conversation in her head could keep her busy. She felt him when she tried, even when he chose not to speak.

Odessen was one earsplitting confusion. Here Lana and Koth had escaped with Ruth in tow. Here allied forces came to prepare for a push against the Eternal Empire and its upstart Emperor Arcann. It all seemed so laughably pointless, but Lana assumed Ruth wanted to be involved. And, in truth, it wasn’t like she had anywhere better to be. Even the Emperor in her head had no suggestions for what to do. And if he did, she would have to oppose him on principle.

Ruth wandered, watching everyone and attracting her share of curious looks as she went. She missed her old black and silver mask, the refuge of the Wrath. But she wasn’t the Emperor’s Wrath anymore, was she? Everyone here called the Emperor the bad guy. And she had nowhere to hide.

Lana had announced the coming of the Outlander, the figurehead for the fight against the Eternal Empire. Vaylin had spoken that title on the HoloNet; everyone knew. Everyone knew.

She walked around the construction zones looking for a peaceful place. She checked behind her at every little sound.

*

Theron stepped off the shuttle and took a deep breath. Odessen still had the feel of a construction zone – and probably would have for a little while yet.

He sauntered amidst knots of people engaged in drilling, stacking, building, sweeping, and everywhere conversation, multilingual, cross-faction, interspecies. It reminded him of good days on Coruscant, as much as any wooded hiding place could. He liked it.

He heard a hollow little snap in his ear. Stopping, he looked around. Only one person sent him that signal, and he saw Lana’s golden hair in the midst of the crowd. Grinning, he came to her.

“Theron!” she said. “There you are. I’m so glad you made it.”

“Nice digs,” he said, looking around. “What can I do to make them better?”

Lana looked professional, in the specific way she only did when something was wrong. “It’s… the former Wrath. She was where we expected to find her. She’s survived, and seems to have recovered physically. But she’s… not who she was. She’s distracted, obsessed with the past. I haven’t been able to get through to her. I was hoping you could.”
He remembered her from previous missions. Yavin, really, start to finish, though she had left to answer other calls before the nightmare of Ziost. Other calls from the Emperor, specifically. She had been a cold but fiercely loyal fighter against all comers. She lived on the frigid side of professionalism, but when she took off her mask in that final argument with Darth Marr…how young she’d been. And how terribly, terribly unhappy.

And, not that he would think it of a career killer who never gave him a second glance, a little bit pretty.

He shook his head. “She always saw me as SIS, you know that. Was there really no one else we could get to do this?”

“No. I’m doing what I can but our resources are limited, Theron. You and I are the oldest allies I could find for her.”

Theron nodded. “All right. Where can I find her?”

“She’s usually in her room, meditating. I think she went outside, though.”

*

There was a freshly erected railing overlooking a little waterfall. That’s where he found her. The reason Lana had called him back, the woman he was to work with as he had worked on Yavin IV six years ago, the only one of that coalition whose whereabouts were completely known: the Sith they used to call the Emperor’s Wrath.

She turned before he reached her. She looked terrible. Little mouth falling open, blue eyes red-rimmed with shadows under them like ink spills. “Agent Shan,” she said in an uncomfortable echo of her customary confidence.

“My lord Wrath,” he said warmly. “Hadn’t seen you in a while. Wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

“You’re not as forgettable as that.”

Honestly? It had been a busy time. He had no reason to expect her to remember a Republic lackey in all that. “You can call me Theron.”

“Ah. You can call me Lord Niral. I am…no longer the Wrath.” She swayed and leaned back on the railing.

He stepped forward. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’ve been working.” She said it with a wrenching ghost of a smile, and seemed to have nothing else to say.

“So, uh. Like what you’ve done with the place.”

“Thank Lana. She’s calling the shots here.”

“Really? Because she didn’t sound ready to take action until you came along.”

“No doubt she thinks I offer some advantage after my…proximity to the problem.”

“Do you?”
“I don’t know.” She looked away. “You’ve fought for so long,” she said distantly. “Not me. It was less than two weeks ago that I fell to my knees and begged my master to make things simple again.” She arrested his eyes with her own and spoke in tones of blunt accusation. “Is that the hero you wanted?”

“Whoa,” said Theron, and kicked himself for it. That said things about her imprisonment…as fighting her way out wasn’t her first choice. “Uh. Wow. That’s…obviously you’ve changed your mind.”

“Yes.” Fatigue smothered her expression. She might as well have had her old mask on. “Everything’s changed.” She wobbled on her feet.

Lana’s requirements notwithstanding, this woman needed help, and fast. “Listen, are you sure you don’t want to get some rest?”

“Quite certain,” she said. “If I close my eyes again I don’t know what will happen.”

“Well, you’ll get some sleep, which doctors tell me is good for you.” Intuition nudged him. “And I’ll give you a wakeup call.”

Her brow wrinkled up. Her eyes were smudges of blue in the shade. “Will you, now?”

“Word of honor. I would pinky swear but I hear Sith don’t consider that binding.”

“No. I guess not.” Why should he be disappointed by her failure to smile? She was, in addition to being spectacularly dangerous, also way too close to an edge that left no room for experimenting. He should be talking her down, not chatting her up. “Promise me,” she said, “I won’t lose another day.”

“We wouldn’t let you. Can I walk you to your room?”

“I know the way,” she said, and pulled herself upright. “Wake me in the morning, Agent.”

Ah. So the job description was going to matter.

Not much he could do about that today. “Sleep tight.” She was already walking away.
Ruth woke to the sound of a holocall. Her heart seized. News of Rylon? Or one of her friends, calling to tell her it had all been a dream and she could go home now?

Silly. No one knew her son. The Wrath didn’t have friends. And, in all likelihood, she didn’t have a home anymore.

She fumbled for the holo and eventually got hold of it in shaking fingers. She hit the button and found Theron Shan looking immaculately groomed and alert.

He didn’t have news that mattered. He couldn’t. That settled, she was finished with him. “Go away,” she said, fighting a yawn. “I’m going back to sleep.”

He grinned. “Should I call you tonight?”

“Yes.” Just to be sure everything was still there. Her search, her everything, could wait a little longer. She was so very tired. Tired enough to ignore Theron’s quiet laughter as she let the holo fall.

*

Ruth slept all day. She took Theron’s friendly call, got up to eat supper in the vast cantina alone, and, setting an alarm, went back to sleep. Valkorion let her be.

She had been paraded past an array of agents and advisors when first Koth had landed her in this strange place. Now in the morning when she was awake and feeling halfway human she was introduced again to the core advisors.

None of them were helping to look for her family. She tried to tolerate them anyway. After a brief meeting Lana let them all go.

*

The discussion about moving materiel for the continuing base development was far from thrilling, but Theron Shan knew such ventures were made or broken on details. He lent his voice to Lana’s requirements and Lord Niral’s few but decisive opinions. And when everyone broke up…

“Time?” said Theron.

“Time,” agreed Lana. She nodded toward where Lord Niral was walking off. “Let her go.”
“She’s going to steal a ship for Dromund Kaas.”

“She doesn’t want the Dark Council on her any more than we do. She’ll wait for the opportunity.”

Theron joined Lana at a console in the corner. “You’re not going to like this,” she told him.

“Let’s have the rundown anyway.”

“Right. Major Fade. Still in the Republic’s service, decorated a dozen times over since Makeb. But she would never give the time of day to an organization that employs a Sith.”

“Joy. That’d be a tough conversation.”

“And you don’t harbor ambitions of holding to account the Wrath who killed so many of your people?”

Theron’s shoulders prickled. And he did remember her defending Republic troops with nothing short of ferocity on Yavin...you know, before she went back to Wrathing. “I think I can’t afford to get that picky. What she does now is what she’s getting judged on. Just like you and me.”

“Right. Master Larr Gith. Whereabouts unknown. Even Teeseven hasn’t had word. She dropped out of the party circuit a few weeks ago. I’m sure we would know if she were dead, but she isn’t out in public.” Lana shot him a pointed look. “I bet you’re wishing now that you’d caught her eye.”

“Her eye doesn’t scare me. It’s the rest of her that does.” The legendary Knight might just be beautiful enough to be worth it. But, perhaps safely for all involved, Larr Gith had less than no interest in the (not really all that) scruffy (really?) SIS agent all throughout their adventures against the Revanites.

In all realism, beautiful. Almost worth it.

“Barsen’Thor Tebbith,” Lana continued crisply. “The Jedi Council keeps him under wraps. We have sightings here and there, but he has adamantly refused contact. I don’t know why he is so determined to avoid responsibility. If we found out maybe we’d have a better chance.”

“We could stake out the Council chambers.”

“Don’t tempt me. Now...Vette. Most sightings are of her Wookiee friend rather than her. She might have escaped custody in Republic space two years ago, but we didn’t get a positive ID on anyone but a grifter and possible associate named Guss. Who, in case you were wondering, is not competent enough to serve as a proxy. Otherwise she’s staying well under the radar.”

“That’s a shame. She was one of the good ones.”

“I’m inclined to agree. Darth Scythia, formerly Nox but apparently you can rename yourself if you intimidate the right people. One of the highest officials left in the Empire and she does it by rubbing the Eternal Empire’s back. From a safe distance. We might persuade her to betray them... or we might die trying. I want the former Wrath more definitely in our camp before we approach her. I could handle her shadow killer, but that leaves one unpredictable Sith to deal with. Next up, Calline, who I presume is still working under Mandalore’s auspices. We might tease her out if we have a challenge for her.”

“Right, because somehow this is a game.” Theron rubbed his temples. “What about that guy who helped you on Ziost? He sounded friendly. And handy in a fight.”
“Egrin? He disappeared after the fighting ended. I checked Imperial Intelligence archives and their only agent Egrin was a Human who died on Coruscant before the Sacking. I haven’t heard from the Chiss since. And that’s the last of the coalition that had any part in stopping Revan and witnessing Ziost. Not a large party.”

“If we had to rank them from least crazy to craziest…”

“We would be very depressed,” Lana finished. “I think it’s good that we have the former Wrath.”

“It’s going to take her a while to settle in.”

“We’ll help her,” Lana said crisply. “That’s all there is to it.”

*

The world needed to stop stopping. It was as simple as that. Ruth stood in a hallway identical to all the hallways in this deep-dug base. And it was blurring.

“You need not fear that I will disappear when you sleep,” said Valkorion. “I will still be here when you wake.”

“Do you think it makes any difference to me whether you’re there or not?”

“Oh, it has. And it will. Remember that, the next time you falter in battle. Remember that, the next dream you cannot stop.”

A chill seized Ruth’s spine. “What do you know about my dreams?”

“I do not see his face. But I see the blaster leveled at you. Over, and over. Droids, turrets…one blaster.”

So did she. “A failed attack in a time that is gone. Did you have anything more to taunt me with?”

“I only motivate for the tasks ahead. Your wounds must be closed by then. Your passion must drive you, not crack you.” He paused deliberately. “I will be able to tell.”

*

“Hey. Outlander. Lord Niral.”

Ruth looked up from where she had knelt on the floor of her quarters’ bare antechamber. Koth Vortena stood in the door, looking worried.

“Koth,” she said, giving up on her Force concentration. She could barely feel outside these walls anyway. Even if her child was listening, he wouldn’t be able to hear her. She forced herself to the immediate moment. “What’s wrong?”

“You start all your conversations that way?”

“Lately? It seems appropriate.”

“Well, nobody’s shot at me for almost forty-eight hours. Hope your day’s been going well.”

She allowed a smile. “I would invite you in but there’s no place to sit.”
“That’s fine. I was just…curious.”

“What about?”

“It’s about the Emperor, actually.”

Ruth went very still.

“Is he…I mean, all there? Can he see what you see?”

“I don’t know all the rules, but he seems to comment whenever he wants to.”

“Do you think there’s a chance you could restore him?”

Ruth looked at him.

“I’m just saying, nobody wants him in your head. He could call back the fleet. He could bring things back.”

“I…” Gone, out of her head. Back on a throne where he could be reasoned with. Defeated first, perhaps, but reasoned with. She could have her Sith Empire back. He had cultivated an idealistic empire, and sought to spread it across the galaxy. Was that the act of a mad destroyer? No. She could force terms, because no matter what the Emperor had done to her, she still had a core that could stand tall. Peace, if only she could pour him out somewhere.

Nobody else here saw it that way. Nobody else here thought of anything but burning him up. And, honestly, as a backup plan Ruth didn’t think that was bad. But stability once more, with someone she knew now better than anyone ever had? The stability that had lasted his empires a thousand years and more?

Interestingly, he remained silent.

“I don’t know,” she said hoarsely. “Do you think anyone here would know how to begin evicting him?”

“I was kind of hoping you could, you know. I don’t know. Force stuff. A fresh, uh, body or something?”

“And just shake my head and hope he falls out? No. We need someone with more experience of Sith alchemy than that. I don’t have the means to make that search where nobody else here will find out.”

He looked anxiously at her. “But you’ll consider it.”

She looked right back. “Yes.”

*

The Zakuulian warship had had some kind of internal problem and been forced into dry dock on a planet near the edge of Wild Space. It was too good an opportunity to miss. Ruth and the others split onto separate ships, one to dock with the warship, one to stay mobile.

But Zakuulian knights were not defending the thing. Civilians were, dozens of them with scavenged weapons and no realistic combat ability. Ruth cut them down. They were near helpless but they had enough weaponry to be dangerous if she turned her back.
Ruth felt it an instant after the last sorry defender fell. The actual soldiers had been on the inside. The actual soldiers had…

“Lana,” she yelled to her comm, “undock now.”

Theron was busy maneuvering a cutter at the other airlock on this side. “Theron!” She reached out with the Force, seized the back of his shirt, and hauled. He yelped as she dragged him back. Things started booming inside the ship. Together Theron and Ruth sprinted back toward where they had landed. Ruth dispatched one or two would-be saboteurs, and together they took off. Behind them fireballs erupted from every point of weakness in the long ship’s hull, including a raging plume where Theron had been cutting.

“We were this close,” grumbled Theron, dusting himself off and stumbling toward the bridge. “Think what we would’ve learned!”

“You would’ve been jumped by an entire crew of soldier cultists mid-self-destruct sequence. That was too close, Theron.”

They jumped to hyperspace. She sat still. Time passed.

“Uh, you okay?” said Theron.

“Yes,” she lied.

“Is this something we need to talk about?”

“Not now, Mr. Shan.”

“Last name. Must be bad.”

“Please be quiet.”

“Sorry.” He sounded sincere. He didn’t prod her further, so she didn’t have to shut him up. She sank into meditation once more, seeking. All she found was empty space.

They reconvened, safe and sound, on Odessen. Ruth and Theron went straight for the big room where Lana had set up a large holoprojector and a series of analysts’ stations. Operations, the beating heart of this endeavor’s intelligence. She waved at Lana and headed into a long conference room that adjoined the place. Together the three exchanged what they knew and what little they’ve learned.

“I still can’t believe they were using human shields,” said Ruth.

“It was the only practical thing to do,” said Lana. “The crew must have been inside making final arrangements before destroying the ship.”

“That’s not the point, Lana.”

Lana cocked her head, looking not quite innocent but inquisitive. “So what is?”

“Did you unfreeze me just to destroy things? Is that my role in this resistance?”

Lana took the swerve in stride. “Far from it.”

“But it’s all you’ve asked me to do so far.”
“And fix the Gravestone. And start operating this place. And yes, you have been eliminating our enemies more efficiently than anyone we could ever hope to attract. We couldn’t have come this far without you.”

“But when I wake up in the morning and check my schedule, and get past the fruitlessly searching for my only child, slaughtering somebody is always on it.”

Lana frowned. “Is that a problem? We have enemies, Ruth. Powerful, determined enemies. You were always the galaxy’s premier force keeping those at bay.”

“Yes, my talent for killing things gets me promoted all over the place.”

Lana stared at her for a little too long. Then she sighed. “Would you rather stay here? For a day. A few days, if you want. Long enough to see what I do here while you’re gone. You should be the leader here, Ruth. I didn’t survive Arcann’s attentions, you did, and people will respond to that.”

“They respond to my lightsaber.”

“We can balance those effects. I think we have to.”

“You know I can kill anybody who threatens us. You know I will. I just…I killed for someone full-time already and it didn’t work out. I am tired, Lana. I need to see what we’re building in a slightly better capacity than that of the attack hound.”

“I understand completely, Ruth. We’ll arrange something.”

“Thank you.” Ruth bowed and turned for the door. Theron was standing there, hands at his sides, looking intent. Probably thinking she was insane. “Sorry you had to see that,” she mumbled miserably, and hurried out.

* 

Theron looked at Lana and pursed his lips to let out a breath. “So that was unexpected.”

“It’s something of a relief,” said Lana. “You and I have been running this as best we can, but we’re only two people, and we appeal to completely separate demographics. As the direct link to resisting Arcann, Ruth is our best chance at synthesis.”

“She’s exhausted, Lana.”

“Ruth Niral has survived the highest echelons of Sith society. She asserted her standing alongside the Dark Council, survived countless assassins, and served the Emperor well enough to be granted not only her life but a practical guarantee of her continued status by the Emperor himself.”

“Until recently.”

“Every battle she has ever drawn her saber for, she has won.”

“But she never had to do it without her son.”

Lana’s attention sharpened. “Is that where the lack of motivation comes in?”

He thought of the pain on her face every time she closed her eyes and left him, which was every spare moment she had. “Got any better ideas?”
“No. You’d think saving the free world would be reason enough to keep pushing…”

“Lana. You and I gave up our homes a long time ago. Up until three weeks her-time ago, she thought she wouldn’t have to.”

Lana’s bright yellow eyes narrowed. “You have a lot of insight all of a sudden.”

Just clues. Just wondering what was going on in this woman’s head, what hurt her so much she thought about slowing down when nothing external could stop her. “Shots in the dark. Something’s got to hit.”

“Yes.” Lana pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut. “Won’t that be interesting.”

*

Ruth nearly repented her request.

Lana called her in an hour early the following morning. There was mail to sort through, already triaged by analysts but still requiring the discretion of the command team. There were logistics to consider, decisions on which of their scant resources must be expended where. The first mention of combat came after forty-five minutes, and Ruth was almost grateful for the change of pace.

They dropped Senya off with the general called Aygo. They dropped Koth off near where the Gravestone was undergoing repairs. Ruth, Theron, and Lana went on, checking on work crews, giving orders to a steady stream of arriving and departing contractors, and always monitoring on the flow of information through ops.

People recognized Ruth almost as reliably as they had with her mask. One or two even yelled encouragement, which she had certainly never gotten with her mask. She missed hiding, but she smiled and nodded to all and sundry. Apparently the Outlander had a little cachet without trying.

When she reached Doctor Oggurobb she had to stop herself from asking what he knew of hopping bodies. That didn’t seem like the province of traditional science, and if she tipped her hand early Lana and Theron would…

…would what, exactly? Tie her up? They needed her too much. She could stand atop the base and yell her intention to fix the Emperor up with an unstoppable robot body and they would still yield her her lightsaber and her personal space.

Patience. She gave Oggurobb some vague words of encouragement and moved on.

The final stop on their looping itinerary was a room as big as any two other ones combined. The mystic Sana-Rae hailed from Voss, a planet Ruth would just as soon forget in its entirety, being as it was the primary scene of her brief marriage with Malavai Quinn. But Sana-Rae maintained a Force enclave.

A number of practice dummies stood around between stands of practice blades, and trainees stood everywhere or sat on fluffy cushions, sparring and conversing. They silenced and turned to stare as Ruth walked by.

It all stopped, except her own pulse. “You aren’t bothering to hide,” a man said in her head. His voice was measured and deep and terribly, terribly dark. “They can feel your power. Though I doubt you could wield it to effect in your current state.”
“Does that bother you?” she said back, searching the frozen scene.

“It is the fact of your power that serves you, not the display. So it has always been.”

She reached the Voss. The alien was colored in red and blue, with spotted eyes that seemed almost compound. Her robes were laid with the care of someone who ascribed meaning to every crease. Ruth had no doubt that if she asked she would get the full description.

The Voss bowed, her oddly carved lips turning up in an unmistakable smile. “My lord. I am the Mystic Sana-Rae. Your visage surfaced in my Trials.”

“You came a long way to see them fulfilled. I take it you are…that is, I see Jedi and Sith here. You are training them as the Voss do?”

“We teach one another. In time, a Sith Lord will come, and in time a Jedi Master. All of us will benefit from their teachings.”

“How optimistic.” She thought about asking the Voss to help her in her search. But Sana-Rae didn’t have the Force connection to Rylon, and Ruth had no way of describing the boy’s unique signature. It would take a Force savant to transfer that kind of knowledge, and while Ruth was powerful in the Force she was not subtle.

For once she wanted to be.

*

“Ruth. The fact is, your skill set vis-à-vis direct interventions…”

“What Lana is trying to say,” said Theron, “is that we need to spring someone out of a Zakuulian prison camp. Humanitarian, but it’ll probably come to fighting. We thought you could help.”

“Just like old times,” Ruth said dryly.

“Are you up to it?” said Lana.

“Who are these prisoners?”

“Political undesirables, mostly. Zakuul keeps them under close guard.”

“I see. I only hope I can save enough of them.” Ruth shifted, still trying to shake off the residual silence from her efforts at meditation.

“The only one we need is Arok Bidd.”

“Let me do something nice for once.” Ruth remembered that, dimly. From before her imprisonment, from before a lot. “I’ll break the entire prison.”

“Break I believe. Break out may be more complicated.”

Ruth felt well enough to smile. “Wait and see.”

Theron pushed away from his lounging against the wall. She wasn’t about to notice, but she was pretty sure he knew how good it looked. She’d been in stasis for five years, but he was the one who hadn’t aged. “The cargo ship you asked for is waiting at the transfer station,” he said. “Mind if I catch a ride with you?”
“I could do with a copilot,” she said. “You do fly things, right?”

“One of my many talents.”

“Good.” Ruth looked back to Lana. “No reactors this time.”

“As a diversionary tactic it was-”

“No. Reactors.”

The meeting was dispersing. Lana, Ruth, and Theron stayed on.

“So,” said Theron, “where did that come from?”

Ruth looked to him and didn’t quite make eye contact. “When we were fleeing on Zakuul. The princess, Vaylin, knocked a power plant into overload. I could have stopped it, but I didn’t. I just ran and let the chaos behind me distract my pursuers.” She shut her mouth and let that hang for a moment. “I could have stopped it, but I didn’t. Dozens, hundreds, more must have been killed or hurt. All to save my skin.”

“It was necessary,” said Lana.

“Well, maybe it’s time I looked past what’s necessary!” said Ruth. “They were innocents, or at worst their crime was being citizens of the wrong Empire. And I just let them die. Lana, I was not a kind woman, but I have never tolerated waste of anything, least of all life.”

“Hear, hear,” Theron said quietly. “Although frankly I didn’t think the big bad Wrath cared.”

“I do now,” Ruth said stiffly. Why, she couldn’t say. She just wanted to save something. “Come if you’re coming.” She turned away.

Ruth’s own ship, the Scorned, was gone, in whose possession neither Ruth nor the alliance knew. But Koth had procured a Fury-class interceptor of similar design. It was sparsely furnished, everywhere familiar but subtly different. It felt as wrong as Ruth did in this new world, this world that was so old to everyone else. She took the copilot’s chair. It meant she didn’t have to look at her fellow-traveler.

“I brought a book for the road,” said Theron, his voice quiet and comfortable in the gloom of the bridge. “Got a copy to loan, if you want.”

“I should meditate,” she said. “Even if it seems pointless now. I haven’t reached him yet. If he were there I must already have…and yet, what if I stop listening now, and he needs me?”

“Could someone be hiding him?”

“Maybe. It would take a great deal of power.” Ruth sighed. “Or maybe not. There are people who turn their Force skills outward. They learn to become one with the world, stretch out, minimize themselves to maximize their contact with the galaxy. Then there are those who turn their Force skills inward. They strengthen themselves and don’t worry about the nuance of the greater currents of the Force, except as it serves their self-contained body and immediate surroundings. I…am one of the latter. And I have never regretted it until now.”

“It’s saved your life so far.”

“You’ll note that hasn’t done anyone around me any favors,” she said dryly. “If I could hear him,
just once…! If I had something to go on, some confirmation, some scrap…but no.” She was glad he couldn’t see her face. “The galaxy is coming down around our ears and I am needed by strangers who are easier to help than my own son is.”

“We’re not giving up on him.”

“I’m not. You don’t have to ‘we’ this.”

“Right.” He sounded genuinely chastened, as if not even realizing his overreach. “Well then. Let me know if you need anything.”

It was so nice. It was like having a crew again. A nice, perfectly agreeable crew. “Have you been assigned to make yourself useful to me?”

There was a pause.

“Nooot in so many words,” he said.

Ah, yes. Like having a crew again. Assigned by somebody else. “Just so we know where we stand,” she said pleasantly, and shut him out.
Ruth and Theron finish a prison break. Ruth and Lana catch up. Theron approaches Ruth. The Force guides Ruth to a new ally, and the Alliance doesn’t like her absence. Ruth sings. (Ruth, Theron, Lana, Ally)

To say that Theron was surprised by the smooth execution of the prison break would be to underestimate the case. Ruth Niral was a wonder in grey, and she commanded by virtue of seeming to summarily dismiss the very possibility of things not going her way.

And, when command failed, the lightsabers Senya and Lana had given her came out. Theron had to remind himself to concentrate on slicing the cell controls. He shut down the warden droids while she started gathering the ragged assemblage of prisoners. He didn’t have to say a word. He just opened the cargo ship they had brought and nodded greeting to the trickle of newly sun-blind strangers. Somewhere in there was the guy they needed for their next move. Everyone else, political prisoners all, was just getting a free ride out of Wild Space.

One of them peeled off and started for the pilot’s door. Theron tightened his hand on his blaster pistol. If some desperate guy thought his only way to freedom was in his own hands…

Ruth caught up to him. With lightsabers reactivated. “Did you get lost?” she said loudly.

He spun to face her and raised his hands. “N-no, lady. Just checking our captain.”

“Well get to a safe place to drop you off,” she said, even louder. “If anyone else feels the need to enter the bridge in the meantime, I will start cutting off parts. And I have enough lightsaber for all of you. Do I make myself clear?”

The prisoners stayed in order after that.

Ruth joined Theron on the bridge and started tapping at the navicomputer.

“So that went pretty well,” said Theron. “Minimal damage, pretty close to maximum cooperation.”

“Better than I expected, yes.”

He looked sidelong at her. “You weren’t actually going to…you know.”

She shrugged. Her mouth turned up a little more at the edges. “I learned as Wrath, with the right audience the threat gets the job done.”

That smile could go either way. “Always?” he prompted.

“Mr. Shan, I would prefer to spare you the details of my career.”

Gnawing curiosity notwithstanding, he couldn’t disagree. Still…she’d done this right. That was something.
The cantina’s noise almost sent Ruth walking in the other direction. She steeled herself. In other times her presence had been enough to silence a room. Here, she didn’t want it to.

Her quarry was at the bar, looking thoughtful. Ruth slid onto a stool beside Lana Beniko.

“My lord,” said Lana. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I’m still exploring,” said Ruth. “The last few days…there has been a lot to get up to speed on.”

“Not overwhelming, I hope.” Lana ordered something with a swift and meaningful gesture of fingers. The bartender produced a glass of something brown and vaguely fruity-smelling.

Ruth took it. “Have I thanked you yet for freeing me?”

Lana set her drink down. She gave Ruth an ambiguous smile. “You haven’t seemed to consider it a good thing.”

Ruth managed a small smile in return. “I’m relevant again. I’m not alone with that voice. Because you risked yourself. It might hurt, but…thank you.”

“I don’t know if I mentioned. I have people looking for your son. Not many – our resources are limited. But they’ll do what they can.”

She felt the stain that the pain left on her face. “Thank you. I will join them soon.”

Lana frowned. “We need you. The entire effort against the Eternal Empire needs you. I hope you’ll remember that.”

“You’ve never had a child,” said Ruth.

“No. I suppose not. But the galaxy you’re saving has him in it.”

“I know.” Ruth sipped, and sighed, and wished she could complete the task that mattered so she could give herself to the task that mattered to everyone else. But Dromund Kaas would be delivering an unprotected Outlander to the Dark Council, and there was so terribly much to do here. “I know.”

*

The mission was rescue and evacuation. Yes, even of Eternal Empire citizens. Written off by their own people, they would adjust to the greater galaxy or…well, that was up to them. At least they would have the chance.

Theron Shan emerged from the base proper and leaned against the railing next to Ruth looking out into the rough-and-tumble forest. “You did the right thing,” he said.

Really? “When I woke up I thought I needed to return to what I was. The Wrath, breaker of worlds.” She paused, wondering whether he took that seriously. This Republic-born Force-blind was so often so casual with her. “That Wrath is still there.”

“I believe you,” said Theron. “I remember her from before. But something changed, didn’t it.”

“Something about losing everyone I ever cared about, yes. Why should that make someone kinder? Why do I think that saving someone else increases the chances, however infinitesimally, that
somewhere someone of mine was spared?”

“Maybe it does. Sounds like the kind of thing the Force would handle.”

“I can hope.” She looked away. Perhaps her son…perhaps somewhere he was safe. If she had to earn that safety with a good deed every day she’d do it until eternity.

“I’m sorry,” said Theron. “That’s not where I meant to take this.”

“No, hopeful was nice.” She forced her head back around to face him. “I don’t mean to get my self-pity all over you.”

He just looked patient. “The rest of us lost borders, lost a friend or two. You lost five years of your life and came out with nothing but your two hands and a couple of…practically strangers. I won’t pretend Lana and I were more than that to you.”

“You were friendly faces. It helped.” It just seemed so small in the face of what she’d had before. But she mustn’t be ungrateful. “I’d rather have you than not.”

“A ringing endorsement if I ever heard one.” He smiled gently. “You’re making a difference. I don’t know if that’s enough. But I hope it helps.” He pushed away from the railing and, a second later, set a hand on her shoulder. She started, violently, and twisted to look back at him.

“Sorry,” he said. Something of that smile lingered in his eyes. “Didn’t mean to startle you.” His hand fell away, leaving her chilled by its absence.

“It’s– all right,” she said nervously, trying to remember her rehearsed defenses. “Good night, Theron.”

“Good night, Ruth.”

It was the first time she’d ever heard her name in his voice. She turned back to the waterfall, and did not dare look behind her again for a long time.

*

Home, or something like it. The light in Ruth’s head flashed out of nowhere and hung, wavering, before her. Instinctively she reached out her hand. The image stayed firmly in her Force sense.

Was it little Rylon? It had to be. The Force wouldn’t bother directing her to anyone else in this wretchedly transformed galaxy.

She blew past Lana in the hallways with barely so much as a grunt. She only deviated from her path to pick up supplies for the journey.

Then, letting the glow around her direct her fingers, she set course for a strange planet not so terribly far away. The waiting started gnawing in her gut and hollowed it out completely before reaching to trouble her racing heart.

She flew, and she landed.

*

The battlefield was vast and every inch of it was deadly. Wynston kept to cover and tried to ration his shots, acutely aware that he was riding close to overheating. An overloaded plasma cell would
kill him just as dead as anything else here.

He hadn’t expected the Sith. She scythed across the ruins like she had somewhere to be, and he had neither the ability nor the inclination to stop her. One more Force user could only wreak so much havoc. And he was no longer equipped to take one on.

And yet, as he watched…

Wynston didn’t wait for the smoke to clear over the bandits’ last stand. The lightsabers were unfamiliar but the woman wielding them wasn’t. Hope, luminous if somewhat the worse for wear, started creeping out from the shadows. Twinned with dread, a feeling as intimately known as his own shadow.

He kept his rifle down as he approached. She turned, short hair flying loose around her. Recognition clicked between them. She wasn’t smiling, but she wasn’t killing him yet, either.

Hope. Maybe, just maybe. It had been close to six years, and she had been wary of him at the end: how would she want to be approached? He didn’t know anymore.

He went to one knee at a safe distance, turning his rifle with its barrel to the ground before him as though it were a sword. He bowed his head, the better to spare her the sight of what was left of his face. “Ruth,” he said. If he could turn over his burdens to her, if she was still willing to carry them…no. He mustn’t get ahead of himself.

“Force take me,” she said, her voice low. “Wynston?”

Still he kept his head down. “That’s me.”

“Look at me.”

So he did.

Her lips parted. Her pale brow contracted. Yet it was pity, not horror. For that reason it took all his will to hold her gaze.

No oaths, no words of sympathy. When she spoke it was only to say “We need to talk.”

*

Ruth shut the door. The entryway reeked of smoke. This whole planet did.

She turned to the Chiss. He was standing upright and rigid, even though his jacket was hanging in tatters off one bandaged arm. Black jacket, filthy with dust, stained with blood. Black pants. Rough crew cut in that dark blue hair. A mismatched assortment of gear hung around his waist and up over one shoulder. He held his oversized blaster rifle sideways, the barrel tilted slightly downward. His hands had not left that weapon on the whole walk to the ship.

“How did you end up here?” said Ruth.

Wynston left off his scan of the hallway to look at her. “That’s a long story,” he said, and shut his mouth, seemingly content to leave it there.

“I just thought…your specialty was never the commando lifestyle. You should be charming people, not running around shooting at them.”
Wynston finally let go the weapon with one hand, and it was to point to the scar that started on his forehead and skipped his eye to run down his left cheekbone, cleaving skin all the way down to his jaw. “I’m less of a people person these days.” Then he turned his face to minimize her view of it.

She studied what he let her see of him. Why him? And why now? “That must have hurt like hell.”

“That other guy got the worst of it.” Those red eyes were still lusterless.

They had always been the type to find one another after a long absence and just mesh. To him their friendship had vanished five years ago. To her it was still fresh. It made her want to be cautious. It made her want to hug him. Regardless, it was probably safest to drop that line of inquiry. “What were you doing out there?”

“Trying to sabotage the bandits. My ship was damaged beyond repair weeks ago, I’m limited to this planet until I can arrange something else.”

“I see. Don’t you have an organization to help you with that?”

Wynston’s shoulders slumped, ever so slightly. “Sith Intelligence didn’t make it, not with any autonomy. I’m cut off. No funding, no situational awareness, no medical coverage, no transport. I lost…I lost something critically important. I used to nudge the Empire. Now I can barely move myself. I’ve done what I can to make this planet livable. But ‘what I can’ isn’t what it used to be.” He looked away for one telling, frustrated moment. When he looked back it was with a little more steel in his eyes. “And you?”

Ruth’s lip trembled beyond her control for just a second. “My son is missing,” she said flatly.

“No. In all this? Ruth, I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll work on it. As soon as the crises let up.”

“I’m sorry anyway. But…that isn’t why you disappeared. Is it.”

“No, it isn’t.” She didn’t want to elaborate on that just then. “I was out of commission for five years. I wish I’d been here to cushion the blow for the rest of you.”

“We survived. Some of us, anyway. From here on in it’s a matter of stabilizing what’s left.” Without missing a beat he reached for a flask at his shoulder, bit the cap aside, and took a drink. He re-capped the flask and looked back at Ruth. “If I promise to help you, will you take me with you? Wherever you’re going.”

“Aren’t you going to ask what I’m doing before you agree to help me do it?”

“No,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. Conning a Sith was a sign of insane desperation. Then again, so was trusting one. Did he trust her? Was the Force really handing her the chance for something that valuable?

She wanted to say yes.

“Well,” she said. “Come with me. I can’t influence what’s left of the government and I can barely begin to dent the war. But I think you and I together can come up with more ideas than I would have alone.”

He dashed his forearm across his mouth, though it wasn’t clear which participant started or ended
that transaction dirtier. “Ruth?”

“Yes?”

“If there’s anything I can do. Something to help make up for five years lost.”

A blunt offer? Or just that selflessness she had admired in him from the start? Either way her answer was the same. “I’ll let you know.”

“Good.”

“I really don’t mind your looks.”

He looked away. “You’re getting sentimental.”

“Do you mind that?”

He finally smiled, a small heart-quickening softening of the strain on his face. "I couldn’t stop you, old friend.”

*

“Lana.”

“Theron?”

Theron looked around the military hangar. Aygo gave him a gruff nod. No one else in earshot. “Have you seen Ruth?”

”No. I assumed she was sleeping in again.”

“Meditating in. You know how much time she devotes to that.”

“It comes out to the same thing when it comes to our mission,” Lana said sharply. “She’s not the Dark Side presence she was when this started. I have yet to be convinced that she’s making up for it in other dimensions.”

“Do you really not feel it when she’s around?” He couldn’t describe the change himself. He only knew that it was there.

“Beside the point, for now. She’s not in her quarters?”

“Not answering,” said Theron, letting his eyes rest on the labor surrounding a fighter someone was trying to return to service. “I guess that doesn’t mean she’s not there. It’s just…Sana-Rae needs the help. And if Ruth’s really missing…”

“Who knows where she might have gone,” said Lana, springing to urgency even while she said it. “Force help us. If she’s gone to Dromund Kaas…”

They raced together. Koth almost collided with them on the way.

“Whoa,” he said. “Code red?”

“Ruth might be MIA,” Theron said, not breaking stride.

“Hey! No! Bad! If people find out she’s there – if people find out she’s anywhere…”
“They’ll find out sooner or later,” like Lana. “But it wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

The trio made it to the high wing that hosted most of the living quarters for the alliance. Lana barely had to touch the door. “She’s not here.”

Theron was already on the holo. “Come on, come on…”

“Not to be alarmist, but she was in the hangars this morning,” said Koth.

“Worse and worse,” said Lana. “Where are you?”

Ruth’s image popped up. All three of the watchers relaxed a fraction.

“So,” said Theron. “You local?”

“I had an errand,” she said flatly. “I will be back within a few hours.”

“Is that all?” said Lana. “Ruth, our responsibilities permit very little room for-”

Ruth cut out.

Everyone looked at the holo.

“She’s still unstable,” Lana said, almost resentfully. “What have we failed to provide, that would give her reason for such hostility?”

“Freedom?” said Koth. “Just putting that out there.”

“She knows—”

“I know,” said Theron. “Let her come back to us, all right? It’s not going to improve our relationship to crack down on her.”

“If this keeps up,” said Lana, “someone will have to.”

* 

Wynston was washed, and bandaged, lying in clean clothes between clean sheets in a place that wasn’t trying to kill him.

He couldn’t sleep.

Ruth was a strike from the heavens that he could not account for. She wasn’t just a face from his past. A startlingly young, suspiciously friendly face. She was the Emperor’s Wrath, plugged directly into the Sith power structure that he had assumed had crumbled. Apparently some part of it remained. Why her? Why here? Why now? Whose side was she on? What wasn’t she telling him and how soon was that withholding going to bite him?

Answers. When he’d lost Intelligence he had lost his access to answers. It was like missing an arm.

A knock came on the compact bedroom’s door. “Come in,” said Wynston. His chest twisted up. He was too tired to want anybody, much less a very conveniently available Sith, but…no, he mustn’t get ahead of himself.

Ruth let herself in. She was in clean grey clothes, no ornamentation. In the low light he couldn’t read her eyes, but her whole manner bespoke caution. Not fear.
“I couldn’t sleep,” she said quietly. “I’m a little surprised you’re still awake.”

“I was just wondering,” he said. “When you came to the planet. You were expecting someone.” The supplies and tending she’d had ready spoke to that.

Ruth looked guilty. “Yes,” she said. “The Force was leading me to someone.”

“Someone specific?”

Ruth hesitated.

“I won’t be offended if it isn’t me.”

“I had hoped it was Rylon.”

“Oh.” The emotion in those two syllables had stripped her heart bare. “Oh. Ruth, I didn’t realize…”

“I don’t have leads. I don’t have anything. I thought…I hoped Quinn would have answers, but Quinn’s gone, too.” She had to catch a shuddering breath. “He wasn’t there because I didn’t let him be there, and now Rylon is gone.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“Couldn’t I?” Her eyes were wide and lost now. “What possessed me to think I was the only thing Rylon needed? Why didn’t I leave advance instructions, something, anything, so that Quinn could pick up if I ever had to leave off? Did he? Or are they both separated and lost? I know I didn’t trust him but better him than a stranger.” Her words caught in her breath and struggled free. “At the same time, how could I be sure? I could only hope. I always imagined he loved our son. I never saw them together, but I imagined. Maybe he does. Why else would he keep visiting him while I was away? I have no way of knowing.”

Wynston let the storm hang for a moment in case it had more on the way. “Have you contacted him?”

“I can’t trust him,” she said in a small voice. “Force help me, wherever he is, I have to keep him in the dark.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. In other days that would be the start, not the end, of a sentence. In other days. Now there was nothing he could do.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “That isn’t what I came here to talk about. There are things we should say while we still have some privacy.” She pushed a strand of hair back from her face. Was it shorter than her usual? One more thing changed from before. “To be honest it would be hard not to sense your worry.”

“I used to be better at hiding that from Force sensitives.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I didn’t.”

She came to sit on the edge of the bed, too close though he no longer remembered the words to tell her that. He stayed very still. “Talk to me,” she said. “I know about the Eternal Empire, and the fall of the Dark Council, but I have no idea how it happened for you.”
So he told her. He told her about the surprise wave of a military stronger than Jedi or Sith had even imagined. He told her about the treachery that brought down the resources he’d been entrusted with in private, his organization suddenly finding themselves beset, and being torn slowly to pieces while he was fully occupied just saving his people from death. And the enemy never slowed, never slackened. It was hopeless. It was all, so hopeless.

He could just barely make out the outline of her lips, and it wasn’t happy. “You’ve been through so much.”

“Everyone has,” he said gruffly.

“Yes, but I’m talking to you. You’re safe here, Wynston. You can rest.”

“People like me don’t rest.” Not if they wanted to live.

“We’re on our way. All you have to do now is sleep.”

She didn’t know. She didn’t know about the night paralysis, the endless wrenching awakenings from dreams he could never remember. She thought it was easy, because she didn’t know.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry you had to go through this.” Her hand came to rest over his on the sheets. She took a slow breath in. And then she started singing.

Her voice was gentle and true, shocking to one who was used to her command tone and yet soothing at the same time. The words were nonsense to him but the melody was sweet.

She paused at the end of a verse. “What is that?” he said.

“A Mirialan lullaby.”

“What does it mean?”

“I honestly have no idea. My father always said there was no good translation for it.” She started another verse, as melodic as the first.

Wynston took a deep breath. He didn’t dare disturb her hand over his. But he shifted to rest his head on his other elbow, and he closed his eyes, and he let her sing. If she touched him one more time she would feel the tears. But she didn’t. The night terrors kept their distance, and when Wynston woke up Ruth was gone.
Ruth and Wynston come to Odessen. Wynston meets the crew, including SCORPIO. Ruth and Theron reminisce about their acquaintance on Yavin. Theron suggests drinks. Ruth asks Wynston about settling in.

(Ruth, Theron, Wynston, Lana, Koth, SCORPIO, Senya)

It was late back on Odessen, but Ruth called anyway. She owed her – allies? – her handlers that much.

“Ruth! You’re back! Or something.” Theron grinned a stone-softening grin. “Everything all right?”

“It is now. I’m bringing us an ally. I think we’ll do great things together.”

“You scared Lana running off like that.”

“I was called. I can’t wait for her permission every time.”

“What about leaving a note?”

“If it makes you feel better.” It was impossible to feel guilty just then. She had saved someone who had been there for her in the best of times. In the worst they could only be good for each other. Even with all that pain in the way she knew they could do something good. “I expect to be there in the morning.”

Oddly, Theron laughed, with a grin that was there to stay.

“What?” said Ruth.

He shook his head. “You glow when things go right. I didn’t think it would translate over holo, but it does. Clear as daylight.”

“Count on seeing it in person,” she said, wondering whether a blush would also translate. There were times when her mask would be useful again. “I’ll see you soon. Give my regards to the others.”

*  

As Ruth circled and lowered her vessel into the Odessen pad, Wynston stood at the front viewport and stared. His hands stayed on the rifle hanging at his side. He said no word to Ruth.

Until they landed. Then he turned. “This place is remote.”

“Yes. That’s part of the reason Lana chose it.”

“And the rest?”

Ah. Where a suspicion might plant, a suspicion would grow. She understood that now, more than
she wanted to. “It’s strong in the Force without being too oriented toward the Light or the Dark.”

“I see. Useful for you, then.”

“Yes. It is.” He didn’t ask whether she still relied on the dark like she had in the touch-and-go ending of their previous association, back when she was driving all her friends away. She didn’t answer. Instead she beckoned. “Come with me.”

They made it maybe halfway down the long wooden path to the base proper before a trio approached them. Ruth would have been glad for a joint introduction, only…

Lana had storm clouds on her face. “I went to investigate a Force disturbance,” said Ruth, trying to head her off. “It turned out to be something good. Everyone, this is my friend, Wynston.”

Wynston jerked a nod. Here he didn’t seem to bother hiding his scar. “Lord Beniko. You might remember me as Egrin.”

Lana frowned. “I remember. You’ve taken some beatings.”

“Haven’t we all. I’m still interested in seeing to the Empire’s good. So long as there remains some shred of the Empire that isn’t biting its own back.”

“So, not at all?” muttered Theron.

Ruth stepped in. “Wynston, this is Theron Shan. He’s former SIS. Your opposite number, come for the same reason.”

“I see,” Wynston said flatly. “Any friend of Ruth’s is a friend of mine, within reason.”

“Hey,” said Theron. “I’m always reasonable.”

“So,” Koth said, too brightly. “You got tricks other than blasters? Not that I have a problem with blasters.”

“Some,” said Wynston.

“Everything an Imperial Intelligence agent can do and some things most of them can’t,” said Ruth. “I wouldn’t bring him here if I didn’t think he could pull his weight.”

Wynston sketched a small smile, his first hint at relaxation. “Yes, you would.”

Koth considered that a moment. Then he reached out his hand. “Welcome aboard.”

Wynston hesitated only a moment before shaking. “Thank you.”

“There’s a lot to see,” said Ruth. “Though if you want to rest first I’d understand.”

“There’s time to rest when I’m dead,” said Wynston. “Reputedly.”

“Then come with me.”

“I’m coming too,” said Theron. It was an overly decisive statement.

And Ruth didn’t want to handle it right now. “Can we spare you?”

“Just trying to help.”
“Theron,” said Lana. And, more quietly, “Let me deal with him. If he was with us on Ziost…”

“Then he left without a word and never lifted a finger for the Empire, Republic, or Alliance again,” said Theron. “If we’re keeping score here.”

Wynston tensed, never blinking. Ruth stepped forward, ready to intervene, but the two kept their glares at a low burn.

“I’ll come with you,” Lana said firmly. “Theron, we’ll talk about this later.”

“All friends here. Right?” said Koth.

“I believe,” said Ruth, “that we can be.” Though she wouldn’t forget how the SIS spy instantly responded to the one person likeliest to know his tricks. “Come on, Lana. Let’s show Wynston how we’re doing resistance these days.”

*  

SCORPIO was in ops, and Wynston stopped dead in the doorway. “Just the chassis?” he said loudly. “Or the sanctions, too?”

“The what?” said Lana.

“The SCORPIO sanctions. The AI. The-”

“Cipher Nine,” said the humanoid droid. “Your survival is unexpected.”

Panic stiffened Wynston’s neck. “The last time I saw you you were in pieces in an Intelligence lab.”

“The term can only be applied loosely,” SCORPIO said coolly. “I learned what I required, and I moved on. Your analysts were barely bumps on that path.”

Dammit. He had warned them. He had warned them a hundred times how dangerous that program was. He should never have taken it from its mainframe on Belsavis. “How many dead, SCORPIO? Were you counting?”

“Of course. You could have, if you were there. Which, strangely, you were not.”

“I can’t spend all my time saving Imperial Intelligence.” In the end he had failed it. In the end he had failed them all. “Lana, how involved has she gotten?”

Lana cleared her throat. “SCORPIO has already been instrumental in-”

“You can’t make deals with her. Listen, I know some people take attempted murder in stride, but she doesn’t regret what she did to my crew. She’d do it again to gather information about these piddling mortals. She’s probably doing it right now.”

“She can be useful,” Lana said flatly. “And the benefit is mutual.”

“Don’t let her out of your sight,” said Wynston. “And do recall that even when she’s in your sight, you can’t see what she’s thinking.”

“You wouldn’t be able to keep up,” said SCORPIO, and turned away.
In the morning Wynston stocked up on things in glass bottles. He had been trickling out his one handy flask for weeks, dying for an actual mouthful of something to keep the world manageable. Now at last he could refill.

He went back to his quarters and got reacquainted, then lay down again. His head started pulsing pain within minutes. All right, maybe he had overdone it.

His holo beeped piercingly. Wynston answered.

“Hi,” said Ruth. “How are you settling in?”

“I’m not feeling well,” he said distinctly. “Just fatigue. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Elaboration on the lie was a habit he would have had before everything happened. Not anymore. Let it stand. “Thanks for checking in.”

*  

“What is this?” said Senya. She was looking at a sullen-looking blue alien with bad posture and a ragged dark blue crew cut. His red eyes caught the light in ops. He was standing among the advisors as though he had a right to be there.

“Wynston,” said Lana, looking up. “He worked with some of us on Ziost several years ago. He’s returned to offer his help.”

“He’s an old friend,” said Ruth. “I trust him.”

Senya didn’t miss the look Wynston gave her. It was shrouded but significant.


“I’m an odd jobs man,” he said in some elegant accent, not wholly unlike Lana’s. It was, at any rate, more refined than she expected from his looks. “Infiltration, sabotage, assassination.”

“I thought we left HK-55 in pieces for exactly these traits,” said Senya.

“Wynston has a little more value to me,” Ruth said dryly. “He has been involved in some of the most daring rescues of my life. I believe we can put his skills to positive use.”

Senya gave the man another once-over. He was about Ruth’s height and wiry, barely filling out the battered jacket he had. She sensed no Force sensitivity in him at all. “You’re saying he rescued you?”

“We all need a hand at times.”

Well, she wouldn’t be in this alliance if she couldn’t make allies. Senya smiled, slightly. “Welcome,” she said. “I hope you’re as good as she says.”

The man finally evinced a facial expression, and it was a smirk. “Try me. But not just now.”

*
Ruth was out doing something, Wynston didn’t know what. He didn’t have the hooks in this operation yet to know these things. It made him nervous. But working while nervous was normal.

“Say, you ever work on a main line Imperial fighter?” said Koth, directing him around a corner. “We, ah, found a couple. Getting them back in service would be good.”

“I wouldn’t be much good with the mechanics,” said Wynston. Which was a partial lie. Reflexive by now. “But the computer control system I should be able to untangle, if it’s giving you problems.”

“Hey. Take over the console, hand me a hydrospanner, I’m happy.”

“We’ll have to trade stories of school learning sometime.”

Koth started walking and Wynston fell into step, idly opening his flask on the way. “The mechanics was always a side job for me,” said the Human. “The Eternal Empire groomed me to be an officer, a lot of this fell by the wayside.”

“You like doing it again, though.”

“Oh, absolutely. Nothing like seeing something you’ve worked on blow the enemy out of the sky.”

Wynston laughed with him, and drank. It didn’t do any harm.

Through the high corridors that twisted around the heart of Odessen’s sprawling new body, and out toward one of the hangars. The ship that awaited them was so familiar it gripped Wynston’s heart still for a fraction of a second: a class A fighter, the kind that proliferated on every star destroyer’s hangar deck. He had piloted one once. It handled like a sneeze, which had left him happy to let other people steer it next time.

More to the point, he knew full well how to slice into its central computer and start setting up policies friendly to a new pilot such as Koth. He set about it at once.

“Any reason SCORPIO can’t do this?” he said.

“I thought you were on Team Tie Her Up in a Corner.”

“Oh, I am. I just didn’t know you were.”

“She didn’t care about ripping Zakuul from the belly up. Not my type.” Koth took up station under the pilot’s chair, doing something with a flashlight and a hand tool. “So,” he said after a companionable silence, “how’re things?”

“Odessen seems to have everything,” said Wynston, stashing his flask again. Data spike, good, Koth had come prepared, time to ease it into place. “Do you have problems keeping it under wraps?”

“We’ve been pretty lucky so far,” said Koth. Luck. Wynston controlled a frown out of the way. “Lana’s pretty strict with who she lets through.”

“Ah. As for instance me?”

“Hey.” He popped his head out. “Ruth says you’re okay. That’s good enough for us.”

“Thank you. Really.” Set up new credentials, under his control. First things first.
“You fight the Eternal Empire much before now?”

The bitterness blocked Wynston’s throat for a fraction of a second. “Some,” he said. “I was involved in some black ops missions very early on. My squad was neutralized.” Let him think it was pain silencing the rest.

“Back in action now, though, right?” said Koth. “Emp–Force knows we’ve got enough on our hands.”

“Yes. I’ll just have to see that you have a little less to worry about.” He set up new credentials, slightly fewer permissions, for Koth and all his friends.

He had learned that there’s never such a thing as being too prepared. For whatever might come.

*

Hyperspace got boring fast. Theron stretched out his hands and got back to reassembling his blaster. Every part was clean and oiled, probably the most controllable part of…well, everything, right now.

“I guess I’m surprised you’re not angry with me,” said Ruth.

He looked over to where she was mending something shapeless and black. “Oh?”

She shrugged, sending him only a flicker of a cool blue glance. “The last time we saw one another, sixish years ago on Yavin, I had nothing polite to say. To you or your government or your mother.”

“Oh. That.” He coughed while summoning the memory forth. “Well. Not to say the Jedi were leading a docile Empire to its own destruction and getting them to cheer the whole process, it was her own obsession with recreational Sith-baiting that had been responsible for the death this whole time, she had no problem sending weaker people on suicide missions while she stood there distracting Darth Marr and calling it strategizing, and maybe she should try giving the Revanites a Senate seat because if that bureaucracy wasn’t enough to make them beg for death you didn’t know what would…am I supposed to be angry about that?”

Color was rising in her cheeks. “You remembered that?”

“Ruth, every military power left in our half of the galaxy remembers. You did do this at the open-air strategy table.”

“I was under a lot of stress.”

“You walked up to the negotiation table all but literally dripping with blood, went off on Master Satele, and stalked into the wilderness, not to be seen again until after Ziost.” He tilted his head. “Did the Emperor really summon you away from Yavin?”

“Yes. That was the last time I saw the Emperor’s Hand.”

“Is that bad?”

Ruth didn’t answer.

Theron cleared his throat. “There’s one more thing I remember.”

“I’m not translating any of the ancient Sith names I might have used for your mother.”
“It’s all on file anyway. No. That was the second day I saw your face.”

Her forehead scrunched up. “Second?”

“Earlier than that. I was in the jungle, up on the ridge over the ritual chamber. I remember I came into this clearing. There were dead men everywhere. You were bending over one guy...you picked up his arm. And then you pulled your mask up over your forehead and...I assume it was sucking. You spat and did it again. Like something venomous had bitten him.”

“It had,” she said distantly. “It’s just that I’d seen so many people drop dead from those snakes. I thought, this one time...”

“But you gave up after a little while. You closed his eyes, and put your mask back, and then called in support.”

“Not support,” she said soberly. “Cleanup. I finished their mission myself. There was no use sending more men for it.” She had let her work down. Now she fixed her eyes on him. “He was too far gone for me to help. Everyone else was worse.”

Theron stared back. “And you hated that,” he asked.

“Yes. Dealing death for a living isn’t the same as enjoying it.”

“One of these days we’re going to have a conversation about that, but not now. What I remember then, what I remember when you took off your mask to get in Darth Marr’s face, was just how sad you looked.”

Ruth looked away, frowning. “That was a long time ago.”

“Think things are better now?”

She looked at her hands. Without the badass Wrath gloves they were small and pale. “How many people have you had to kill in the last forty-eight hours?”

None. “Point taken.”

*

Ruth wasn’t sure where Wynston spent most of his time. He had made the base at Odessen his regular stomping grounds, and at odd times she would catch him in conference with their general, their acquisitions expert, their resident scientist. Not the Force savant. Never the Force savant. He had always laughed off religion, but Ruth suspected there was a little fear mixed with that disdain.

He was always busy, but he always had a dark sort of smile and a courteous word for her. It wasn’t the man who had swept a Sith apprentice off her feet on Dromund Kaas and Nar Shaddaa. Then again, she wasn’t that woman anymore, was she? Neither one would be so easily fooled again.

She found herself back at the deck next to the waterfall. The railing was slick but the sun was warm here. Powerful in the Force, Lana had said of this planet, and it was true. Did Ruth come here to try to hear a little more clearly? Maybe she did. No one would stop her.

“You like it here.” It was Theron, sounding as casual as only Theron could. She half smiled and moved over to give him room. He settled a little closer to her than he strictly had to. She considered and decided she didn’t mind.
“My senses are sharper here,” she said. “Apart from hearing. The waterfall tends to interfere.”

“Of all the nerve. How’s the downtime treating you?”

“To be frank? Every minute I’m not moving I think I should be on Dromund Kaas. But I really can’t go over that again.”

“Okay, fair enough. I was wondering, do you have a minute? A few minutes. Half an hour, maybe.”

“Of course I do. What for?”

“You probably haven’t seen how they redid the cantina a few days back. What with you working 24/7. We could check it out. Grab some drinks.”

Did he really dare? Of course he did. The tension that wasn’t in his words slid around the borders of her perception, and it left her on edge. What he was asking was impossible for a host of reasons that gathered around the edges of her mind and prepared to pounce. “You know we shouldn’t…”

“Is this the royal we talking?” he said lightly. She didn’t know what to tell him, but he must have seen that her face was far from decided. Even a touch would be…not something to hope for. Stop. “Just thought,” he said quietly, “it’d be nice to take some time for just you and me.”

He had been kind, and moreover his physical presence was terribly pleasant. She thought about kissing him. Skipping the overture, they could always make it up later, just lean up into someone tall and warm and let her burdens rest. The thought was as tempting as it was crazy. He was on the Alliance’s side, not hers. That was enough to smother any idle thoughts, any noticing of…of anything. He was not touchable and he was not close, and that was as it should be.

“I’m not so sure we should,” she said. “That’s all I can say. I’m sorry, Theron.”

The spell snapped. He covered well with something of a cocky smile. “All right, then. Sorry to bother you.”

“I’ll see you around.” It was a question.

He nodded. “Count on it.”

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Wynston ducked his head. “Ruth, I’m in the middle of getting ready-”

“Yes, you are. And have been, any time you’re not actually out, for weeks.”

“Lana keeps us all busy,” said Wynston. He kept his eyes on the console he was tinkering with.

“Cantina?”

“Ordinarly I would love to have a drink with you-”

“No, you wouldn’t. Cantina or someplace private?”

He sighed ever so slightly and stood. “Private.”

So they went to her quarters.
She leaned on the door after it closed behind her. “Wynston, you’ve been avoiding me.”

He looked bland, settling with his arms crossed over his chest in the center of the antechamber. “We’ve both been busy.”

“You’ve been busy avoiding me.”

“Do you need something? You know I never mean to neglect you.”

“I need to know what’s going on with you. And that includes why you’re pushing me out.”

“I’m…”

“Say it. I dare you.”

Wynston sighed. “I’ve had a great deal to do without you. I would prefer to do it without you.”

“But why?”

Wynston shook his head. “Can’t you guess? You knew me before. When we were both very young and pretty. You are still young and pretty, like nothing ever happened. I don’t need the reminder.”

Well. She had dared him. “Is that all I do? Remind you?”

“All? No, not by half. I’m not unaware of your contributions here, Ruth. And your kindness to me. It just isn’t something I want to need.”

“Then don’t need me. We can still be friends.”

“You saved me.” Abruptly he folded his hands behind his back and paced to the far wall. “What does that do to a person? Needing saving.”

“It makes them normal. We all need something, sooner or later.”

“Not me. I’ve been self-sufficient…no. I thought I was self-sufficient. Then I lost Imperial Intelligence. And that was everything. And by myself I was useless. Useless, Ruth.”

“You did good where you were.”

“Did I?” He shrugged. “How do I know what good is if I don’t have the briefing? How do I know anything? I was fighting blind. For all I know I was fighting on the wrong side. Until you picked me up and gave me eyes again. So what does that do to a person?”

“Nothing you can’t live with.”

“If you stood any closer, they might as well hollow me out and pour you in. I can’t let that happen.” He coughed a laugh and turned around. “So yes. I’ve been avoiding you.”

“Wynston…” She drew closer and he didn’t stop her. “I don’t know what you went through to make it here. And honestly I don’t understand what you need now that you’re here. But if it’s in my power, you’ll have it.”

“I know.” He passed a hand over his hair and looked away. That, he very clearly didn’t say, was why he would never ask.
Chapter Summary

The Odessen crew condemns the Emperor. Senya mentions poetry. Wynston takes Ruth on an educational excursion. (Lana, Ruth, Koth, Wynston, Theron, Senya, SCORPIO)

Lana and Ruth spent a long time trying to work out exactly what General Aygo was asking for, but they got there. Afterward they made for the war room. It was time to kick off another campaign.

“Ruth,” said Lana. “Have you had any more visitations from the Emperor?”

“Visitations? He’s always there, to some extent. Watching.” And talking whenever he felt like it. “Frankly I’m surprised I haven’t been banned from all strategy meetings.”

“We can’t afford to exclude you,” Lana said briskly. “And as long as his goal is Arcann’s destruction, we’re on the same side.”

“How quick you are to say that.”

Lana looked terribly understanding. “You don’t like allies of convenience.”

“I don’t like the convenience of allies. How quickly acquired and pressed to the heart, how quickly transformed into something else. Anyway, here we are. Shall we go in?”

Lana nodded and followed Ruth into the war room.

“There’s still a chance,” said Ruth, “that we can get the Emperor to see reason. Once Arcann is out of the way…”

Wynston’s head came up sharply. “Once that happens the Emperor is no longer our ally. If we can get him out of your head sooner, so much the better.”

“But he’s on the right side for now,” said Koth.

“And he’ll make himself useful,” said Ruth. He was, after all, her old master, the director of her career ever since she’d reached adulthood.

“Most use he can be is to curl up and die,” Theron said in a joking-not-joking tone.

“He’s a powerful ally,” said Ruth.

“Doesn’t mean we I have to like it.”

“Ruth,” said Wynston. “This is the thing that destroyed Ziost.”

This again. This horrible, unavoidable allegation. “There’s no proof it was him at Ziost. Its destruction must have been overstated.”

“Hear, hear,” said Koth. “There’s no way he had a reason to wipe out an entire planet.”
There was a moment’s silence.

Wynston was staring, unblinking red. “Didn’t you feel it?”

“I felt…something. Supposedly. I was asleep, it could have been anything. I thought my master was speaking to me one last time. It doesn’t mean what you say it means.”

Lana was visibly restraining herself. Wynston didn’t. “You can’t deny it.”

“Can’t I?” flared Ruth. “There must have been a reason. There must have been something. He wouldn’t waste like that. He never did when I served him. He was a rational actor, Wynston!”

“And he rationally murdered millions to advance his own Force ritual.” Wynston’s mouth kept moving for a few seconds, voiceless. Then he sealed his lips.

“Let’s move on,” said Lana. “We know not to trust him now.”

Slowly, painfully, the conversation limped to where it was needed. The Emperor was not mentioned again. But every look across that table was burdened by his shadow.

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Ruth passed from her quarters, from another fruitless meditation, to the boardwalk by the waterfall. She leaned forward over the railing and stared at the restless current.

“You burn in the Force.” Ruth turned, startled, to see Senya. “I see it from here.”

“I was just exercising,” she said. “Unsuccessfully.”

“You’re still looking for your son.”

“Yes. I…realize, I have no right to complain next to you.”

“Really? Is the unknown possibility of loss preferable to knowing he turned into a monster?”

“I don’t know. I think I might make that trade.”

Senya nodded thoughtfully. “I had another son. Arcann’s twin. Thexan. I didn’t know him any better than I knew the others. But Arcann murdered Thexan. I don’t know what to say to him when we meet again.”

“I’m sorry. That’s more than anyone should have to…”

“You know what Odessen is missing? Children. I include yours in that evaluation. Perhaps as Odessen grows. Perhaps as fate grows inclined, for once, to smile.”

“Does it do that for people like us?”

“I wrote a poem about it once. I’ll spare you unless you’re really curious.”

Ruth eyed her curiously. “Do I have to give constructive feedback?”

Senya chuckled. “A poem once released is between its page and its reader. I don’t mind.”

*
“The planet’s about eight hours out,” said Wynston. “You and I should be crew enough. I was going to hit hyperspace and sleep.”

“Sure,” said Ruth. “Where did you say we were going?”

“Little world, well out of the way,” he said. “I’ve heard there’s Eternal Empire-flavored danger on the ground around their capital city. It should be a quick enough intervention.” He smiled crookedly. “Let it never be said I’m excluding you.”

“All right. Give me five minutes to pack.”

“Still haven’t gotten the hang of travel,” he said lightly, “have you?”

“Ow! What was that for?”

Wynston put up his hands, grinning. “Meet you at the **Ministry**.”

The *Ministry of Corrections II* was Wynston’s personal ship, acquired after several months’ regular borrowing of Odessen resources. It was comfortable and it handled well, which was what mattered on a day-to-day basis. They worked in companionable silence to take the ship out and into hyperspace, then split up to sleep.

The whisper woke her up. It wasn’t Valkorion. It wasn’t anyone, so far as she could tell. Just… something forlorn at the edge of feeling.

She prowled the ship, finding no information of use, and ended up outside Wynston’s door. She knocked. Moments later he answered, neatly dressed and alert.

“What is it?” he said.

“Problem,” she said. “I sensed a disturbance in the Force, but when I checked the navicomputer it was locked down. Wynston, I have a bad feeling about where we’re going.”

“I thought you might. Let’s just complete the trip.”

“Who are we trying to save, exactly?”

His red eyes were unreadable and his voice comfortably bland. “Whoever we find when we get there.”

He had a steady hand at the controls, and Ruth slipped into the copilot’s chair to assist with the transition out of hyperspace and down into atmospheric flight. The planet was…grey. A strange, dull, blurred grey, as though it were perpetually at the very corner of her eye.

And it felt…

“Wynston,” she said through numb lips. “You bastard.”

“I need you to see what’s down there,” said Wynston.

“What’s down there is nothing! This might not even be Ziost, this is some wreck of a planet you want to show me to prove a point!”

“Check the navicomputer. Ziost, former population one billion.”

“Turn this ship around.”
“I need you to get to the surface. I need you to tell me something. I’m not a Force sensitive, I can’t do this, but you can.”

Her brain was screaming at her to take over the main controls, turn around, get away, get far far away and never come back. Zios was the masterpiece to those who said the Emperor was bent on destroying all life in the galaxy. Something had happened to Zios, yes, that was undeniable. But to say it was Ruth’s old master, the one who had accepted her vows and in return never betrayed her? No. It couldn’t be. It mustn’t.

Because if it was, and she had been obeying his every command that whole time…

“We need to leave.” Her dread was crying out in a vast sense of emptiness, and with a start she realized that that emptiness was the pulse of the planet.

The pulse had stopped.

“Wynston, if we go down there I can’t guarantee we will return.”

Wynston kept on his course. “Really?”

“Yes.” It was opening beneath her, boundless and directionless and hungry.

“Just this once,” he said slowly, “trust me.” And he brought the ship to land on a dust-covered pad at the center of a still-standing city.

He lowered the ramp. “It’s time.”

Against the desperate shrieks of her common sense Ruth walked with Wynston down to the grey surface. It was more a plaza than a landing pad, with dull grey statues standing all around, and beyond them, rank upon rank of sturdy angular buildings, all of them dark, intact but silent, as though everyone had temporarily left the room. All those people…. The dust that the Ministry had blown out of the way settled, slow and sullen.

Hesitating on the ramp’s end, Ruth gasped for air. Every new planet had its own Force signature sustained by its living things. It was barely-noticeable texture, like the scent of the atmosphere or the sounds of the city around. And now, here, it was missing.

“Ruth?” Wynston had backed off the ramp and onto the dead ground. “Just a little further.”

Steeling herself, she stepped onto the ground. It seemed to yield a little beneath her feet, as if too tired and unreal to present a solid physical barrier.

“No,” she whispered. Her heart swelled and labored. “No, no, no. Wynston, if so much as a breath of the Force were still here, it would be weeping.”

“You can sense its absence?”

“Like you took me to a planet without air and asked me to take a walk outside.”

“I’m sorry. I know this can’t be easy. But I have to tell you – the Emperor did this. Our Emperor. He destroyed this entire planet. You know nothing less powerful could have done it. Your former master did this. And that’s what’s riding around in your head now. I beg you, don’t listen to it.”

Her perception shifted. Distant things became clearer, near things more blurred, with fine grey dust at the edges of her vision. There beside her stood Valkorion, her own private taste of power, a
strangely compelling speaker. “Here you see it,” he said, calm and unhurried. “The world where everything changed. For me, you…the galaxy.”

“You killed every living being here,” she said, and believed it, and despaired.

“They died opening my eyes to the truth. I have passed beyond death’s reach.”

“Everything dies. Even you.”

“Our flesh is not what we are.” He laughed quietly. “At long last I am truly free.”

“Then why stay with me?”

“You are a part of me I wish to keep.” Valkorian nodded at Wynston. “What about this one?”

“He’s a friend.” She fell back into the practicalities. “We need him to take down your children.”

“Does he even know what he’s fighting for? The failed Empire, the hopeless Republic, any kneejerk cause his poorly concealed heart can leap into for a day or two at a time?”

“He’s a valuable ally.”

“He will wear away at your resolve until you surrender to his wishes or remove him from your side. I expect you know which solution benefits you.”

“You’re wrong about him.”

“Either I am wrong about him, or he is wrong about me. Consider which of us has a greater stake in your wellbeing.”

But he didn’t deny what had happened here.

Focus shifted again. Valkorion was gone. Everything, everything in this entire world was gone, except her and Wynston.

Wynston and Ruth stood beneath the wing of the Ministry II. They were the only living things on Ziost, and their every movement disturbed dust like the ghosts that could no longer move on their own.

“Ruth?” Wynston said quietly.

“Wynston.” Ruth shook herself. The aching stillness of this grey planet seemed to retreat a step. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.”

“What are you doing?” whispered Valkorion.

“Shut up,” she whispered back.

“Try to hit me,” she said.

“Are you sure?” said Wynston.

“Just do it. Don’t hold back.”
“Agent Wynston’s vessel sought departure clearance two hours ago,” SCORPIO said to the empty room. “I believe the Outlander was with him.”

Lana stopped in the doorway, then looked back at Theron. “She can’t keep disappearing like this.”

“Have you told her that?”

“Have you?”

“She doesn’t listen to me. I’m the Republic spook, remember?” That was the best reasoning he had available for it. Sounded better than “I’m just that unattractive.”

“Have you tried getting to know her better?”

Theron cocked his head, glaring. “Have you?”

“Very funny. If I thought I was her type I’d do it in a heartbeat. We need her attached.”

“Because ‘this is the right thing to do’ isn’t good enough for her?”

“I sincerely hope we never find out otherwise.” Lana scowled and walked into ops, checking for SCORPIO. The droid’s chassis was inert in a corner. She was jacked in, then. “SCORPIO, did they register a flight plan?”

“The plan filed follows the pattern Agent Wynston habitually used to cover his tracks. I would ignore it. I do not know where he intended to go. But if you find out…inform me.”

Ruth had issued her challenge. Wynston responded. In an instant his habitual understated attitude was gone, replaced by something lithe and deadly. He took two long steps and one quick swing. Ruth knocked his fist aside. The impact hurt, and for once she couldn’t wrap it in the Force to dull the pain. There was simply no Force on Ziost to summon. She sidestepped and swung back at him. He dodged and turned the moment into a hard jab. Ruth deflected him again, and again, and tried a kick, which he deftly sidestepped.

Her intuition was gone. Not really her intuition, then, was it? It was the power of the Force that allowed her to predict her enemies. It was the Force that turned her punches from something a Force-blind like Wynston could counter to something that would knock him out of a fight for good. It was the Force that made her reflexes so fast she could skip two steps ahead of him and never feel the difference.

She had superb physical conditioning. She had a lifetime of training. But so did he. And he was not dependent on fate.

“Tools?” grunted Wynston as he blocked her punch and retaliated.

“No,” she said, eyeing his laden utility belt with suspicion. “Hands and feet.”

“Noted.”

Her mounting frustration and fear had no outlet, no response from the world around her. She swung around the Ministry’s landing strut and, fighting gravity’s tyranny, whirled around into a kick that
should have sent Wynston sprawling. It did. But before she could reach him he was back on his
feet, puffing dust, kicking, swinging, and suddenly one foot was tangled in her legs and she was
slammed to the ground.

He straddled her hips, well clear of her flailing legs. He pinned one arm with his hand and raised
his other hand in a fist. “When do we stop?” he said breathlessly.

In another lifetime it might have been tantalizing. Here she could only think of winning, proving
something against the emptiness of her master’s wake. With all her might, she rolled. Wynston
topped. They fought on the ground, then rose to fight on their knees, then pushed off to their feet
and resumed their mad flurrying. Both were landing hard hits now, on arms, on midsections, one
star-bursting blow that crushed her lip against her teeth. They were the only life on this entire
forsaken planet, and they were locked in discord.

She tasted blood and wondered whether Valkorion would offer his power again here. She had used
it. She had used it at every turn, because it brought her closer to victory, because her right hand
was still in some way her master’s right hand. But he left her to face this on her own. The hell of it
was, she had to be grateful for that. Because he had done this, all around her. And she could be his
no longer.

Wynston’s foot connected with her hip hard enough to send her staggering. In an instant he was
following up, knocking her to the ground again. This time he pushed her facedown and seized one
arm viselike to twist behind her back. “When do we stop?” he said again.

She wriggled. It hurt her arm, no more than she deserved. “This is it,” she said roughly. The
ground was gritty against her smarting cheek. “Here’s your chance to end it.”

Wynston eased his grip. “End what?”

“Valkorion’s host. You’ll never have me at this disadvantage again. Now is your chance.”

And she waited for him.
Ruth and Wynston fight over Ziost. Ruth returns home, much sobered, and breaks down a little while Theron tries to assist. Ruth tells the Alliance the plan has changed. One mission goes wrong for Theron and Ruth. They have a moment of peace anyway. (Ruth, Valkorion, Wynston, Theron, Koth, Senya, Lana)

A moment’s silence. A sluggish wind mourned at a distance over the grey dust of Ziost. “Never,” Wynston said in a low voice. “Not you.” His hand and weight went away. He offered Ruth a hand up.

She made it as far as sitting, then, winded, bent over her knees. “You win,” she said in a small voice.

He was breathless, too. “Win what, exactly?”

“I believe you,” she said. “The Emperor did this. And it’s like the silence right after the worst scream I’ve ever heard. Is that what you wanted me to see? Is that what you wanted me to admit?”

“In a word? Yes. But why fight?”

Ruth hugged her knees and tried to say it. “I wanted to know what happens when you take it all away from me.”

He regarded her in silence. He didn’t say what they had both just learned. He was too kind, and besides, they would never allow another planet to end up like this one, so it wouldn’t again be an issue. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” he said. “We can go upstairs now, get that tended.”

“Just like that?” she said.

“Just like that. You don’t have to come back here, ever. It’ll be all right.”

“No, it won’t. He’s still here, Wynston. With his whispers and plans, with everything he’s done, with everything I let him do to me. It doesn’t matter who I serve, or what rules I try to rely on. It always ends up like this. It always goes wrong.” She covered her face with her hands and the result wasn’t concealing enough. “If I can’t be Sith, what am I?”

“Ruth Niral,” said Wynston without so much as a missed beat. “My friend. Everything else is up to your discretion.”

In spite of herself she smiled wanly. “First two points nonnegotiable?”

“Well, you could change your name if you really wanted to.” A fleeting, heart-wrenching smile. He crouched to stay at her level. “You served the Empire. Just as I did, just as millions of good men and women did. You were betrayed. He did that to you, of his own accord and his own will. You’re not culpable for his lies.”

“He never lied to me.” Ruth laughed mirthlessly. “He never said he meant to benefit anyone but
himself. He never said that the strong Empire he wanted corresponded in any way to a safe population.”

“He never let you ask.”

“He’s so comfortable with me he moved in!” She pointed to her head. “He’s a part of me because I let him be!” Because, idiot that she was, grateful as she had been to have something to answer to again, she had knelt to her master.

“He forced himself upon you because he knew he could never survive any other way. I know you can fight him.”

She was tired of arguing. She was so tired. “Even now half of me wants to just say You, there, now. Lead me so I don’t have to think about it.”

“Ah.” His expression was far kinder than it had to be. “I need your conscience. I need your judgment. I need your—” he touched his jaw and grimaced—“incredibly potent right cross. But I don’t need your subservience. You keep me from my demons, and you have my word that I will do my utmost to keep you from yours.”

She felt shaky. “We’re done here.”

“Absolutely. I’ll break out the kolto, there’s enough to go around.”

“Okay.” She stood in a symphony of fresh pains. Valkorion was silent. He had better be.

*R*

Ruth couldn’t meditate. Nothing would calm the agonizing whirling of her head. Nothing could be all right anymore.

That’s when he came to her again.

“Don’t start,” said Ruth. “You did this. You did this! You did this!”

“Ah. That is my Wrath.” Emperor Valkorion sounded almost affectionate. “Always brightest in betrayal.”

“I trusted you!”

“You never did. Did you think I failed to read your heart? Even at your darkest you held to a kernel of something pure. You were a failure as a Sith. I am forced to hope that you prove more dedicated in your efforts against my son.”

“Your son is not the point. Ziost is the point. Millions over millions is the point. You using me all this time to support your murder is the point!”

“You were not so reluctant to aid my plans on Voss. Nor even on Korriban thereafter.”

“I didn’t know. You never trusted me with your plans.”

“You could not be trusted to that degree. And then at last I grew beyond needing even a Wrath.”

“But you need me now. Is this all of you that’s left?”

“You,” he said slowly, “cannot be trusted to the degree necessary to answer that.”
She walked up to him in their grey mindscape. She punched him. It was a white-hot pain stabbing up her arm in the instant before contact. Both of them staggered backwards.

“Your usual solution,” said the Emperor, immediately calm again, “will not avail you now.”

“I will destroy you,” she said.

“Are you willing for your cause to cost you your life, knowing that even that might fail to end me?”

“When I’m sure you’ll go with me,” she said, “you might be surprised at what I’ll pay.”

He left her alone then. Her tears trickled at a perfectly steady rate.

* 

After enough fortification by way of drink, Wynston was waiting outside Ruth’s room when she emerged. She turned her face away and hurried to the refresher.

He waited. Patience was rewarded after not too long.

“I’m sorry,” he said as she came to a halt in the hallway. “But it wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. Her eyes were red but her cheeks were dry. “I was helping him for so long. Helping him! I was such an idiot!”

“Leaves you feeling used up, doesn’t it. I know a little about being coerced into helping the enemy.”

The self-pity wavered and let something else through. “But you never - I mean, surely you had no choice.”

“Didn’t I?” How much like her, to assume it couldn’t be a fault in her friend. He couldn’t look at her, and he knew she knew he couldn’t look at her, and honestly that part didn’t matter as much as the old pain. “Could I have found a way around the command? Was I good enough to throw it off by willpower alone? Did I try hard enough? In the end, he gave me orders and I followed them and people who shouldn’t have died died.”

“But not a planet.”

“No. Not a planet. Your handler was far, far more cruel than mine. But you can’t second guess yourself. If the remorse overpowers you, he wins.”

“If I don’t feel remorse, I’m no better than he is.”

“Come here.” He drew her, as gently as he knew how, into a light shoulder hug. After a second’s hesitation she pulled him in closer, wrapping her arms around and resting her head on his shoulder.

He waited until her little shudder ended and then, selfish though it was, could wait no longer. If she was going to hate him for showing her this, he wanted to know now. “Forgive me,” he murmured.

“Forgive me,” she whispered back.

“Done.” That she was accepting this at all was to her credit. If he had brought her all the way to the scene of the crime and she still denied it…well, then she wasn’t really the woman he had come to respect. And she wasn’t the woman the Alliance needed.
“Done,” she whispered. It eased his heart.

He pulled away and, touching her chin to tilt her head down a little bit, kissed her forehead. “If I knew how to sing I’d do it,” he murmured.

That earned him a slightly damp smile as she stepped back. “I denied it to your face. For so long. You don’t have to be sympathetic now.”

“I really do. I have reason not to believe in most things these days. But I believe in you. Now get some rest.” Beyond this all he could offer was space. “I’ll let you know when we reach home.”

*

Theron was talking to Doctor Oggurob when Lana beside him stiffened and looked to one side. “Someone’s coming,” she said in a low and urgent voice.

“Right now?”

“No. Down the west hallway, toward living quarters.” She looked at Theron, seeming genuinely shaken. “You might want to handle this.”

There was a reason they worked together so well, and part of that reason was the speed with which he put her instructions into practice. When he reached the west hallway he could swear he felt her before he saw her. Ruth, sickly in grey, was sweeping through the hallways, sending people scattering in her singleminded haste.

She had been crying, and heavily.

Theron ran up alongside. “Ruth! Ruth. Stars, Ruth, look at me.”

She kept on at a near run. Her short brown half-curls had fluttered loose from their ordinary combed order. Her breath came in gasps that were ragged not from exertion. Theron followed close behind. “Listen to me! What’s wrong?”

She rounded the corner and headed for her quarters. Having no choice, he followed. “Ruth, talk to me. Just slow down. What happened? Where’s Wynston?”

She took a sharp breath and cast her eyes ceilingward for a moment. “He’s all right,” she said.

“Okay. So talk to me.”

“Not here. Not anywhere.” She scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “Go away.”

“Not until you’re all right.”

“Not right. Not ever right. I was wrong,” she said thickly. “I was wrong, I was wrong, I was wrong, there was no mistake, there was no greater good, there was only death there and I didn’t stop it. I didn’t stop it, Theron!”

He skipped just shy of knocking someone over and rushed back to Ruth’s side. “Is this…Ziost?” Oh, hell. Having been there he knew full well it merited tears. She hadn’t been there. She didn’t know. But this wasn’t the time and place for pointing that out. He needed her to be stable, even if she wasn’t right. “Ruth, you couldn’t have. Even if you came to the planet you would’ve died with all the rest.”
“I trusted him! Even when I told myself I was watching I trusted him. I let myself believe he was doing good, if not for individuals here and there then for the Empire as a whole. And when he broke that I told myself he was working for the good of his other Empire. And I never slowed down long enough to think…he’s a murderer, Theron. On a grand scale, but in the end, a plain murderer.” She sobbed. “And I gave myself to him.”

“A lot of people did, Ruth. He didn’t let anyone question him, you know that.”

“Questions!” Her eyes brimmed over. She elbowed into her room blind. “All I have are questions. And it’s too late for any of them to matter.”

“Ruth. C’mere.” She didn’t resist when he stepped in after her, pulled her into his arms, and squeezed her tight, letting the door fall shut behind them. “It wasn’t your fault.” Nothing that big could be one real person’s fault. “It wasn’t your fault.”

She addressed his chest. “I was so stupid.”

“You were misled. By someone we’re going to defeat once and for all. Does it help any, knowing that?”

Her breath hitched a few times. “Nothing helps. He admitted to Ziost in my head and I still thought there had to be a reason, something…all so I could justify my existence all these years. I had to disbelieve it or else I was nothing.”

“You know the truth now.”

“Stop caring!” She pushed away and stared up at him. “Why do you think I’m good? Why do you think I’ve ever done any good when the evidence against is…is Ziost and more? Why would you give anything guilty of that a chance?”

“Because you’re not a thing. And you can always turn it around. I think you just did.”

“Stop talking,” she sobbed.

So, admitting the inadequacy anyway, he took her hand and led her through the austere antechamber to her bedroom. He thought in irrelevant analysis that it wasn’t the room of a woman who expected guests. No decorations, no customizations; it felt temporary. Her few possessions were draped over the sparse furniture or piled in a system known only to her on the floor. He led her past them and, pushing the hard pillow on the narrow bed aside, sat where it had been, drawing Ruth back into his arms.

A long time later he realized his nose and mouth were buried in her hair. She wasn’t fighting him.

“It’s still not okay,” she mumbled.

“I know it’s not,” he whispered.

“I have to keep living. Knowing this. And knowing that I didn’t stop him.”

“He would have killed you.”

With a supreme effort she sat up. Her face was burning from tears. “Thank you,” she said. “You should go now.”

He disagreed, strongly. “If there’s anything else I can do.”
“I know.” Not looking at him, she gestured dismissal.

He stood up and waited for her to lie down in his place. He took one of the crumpled blankets from the floor and tucked it around her with infinite care.

Then, because she wanted him to go, he went.

*

Later, after her tears had dried, this is how Ruth thought about it going:

Theron said the words that made the pain go away. That made the horrible happening and her complicity fade into a perspective that she could live with. The words were a blur but his tenderness was clear.

She stopped crying.

“How are you?” he said gently. He had the nicest voice. Always like things were going to be all right.

“I’m a little better,” she said.

“Good.” When she sat up he made a tiny protesting noise and caught her hands in his own. He raised one to his lips and kissed her palm, ever so gently. Then the other. She sat raptly still.

He studied her face and half smiled. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

She reached out to run a fingertip behind his cybernetics, down his temple and cheek. “I know,” she said, and believed it.

He kissed her, almost leisurely in the lean-in and caress. Somewhere in that warm lazy contact he leaned back, drawing her down with him, his circling fingertips chasing all other concerns out of her mind. She reached up and pushed his jacket back, running her hands over the tense muscles of his shoulders, almost like – no, don’t think about that – and when he kissed her again it drove everything else away, everything, every wrong step and wrong day, until there was nothing left but him and her.

*

Later, after he had had some time to clear his head, this is how Theron thought about it going:

He said the words that made the pain go away. He put the whole galaxy on hold for however long it would take to get her to rest. He let her sob in his arms until she had come to a clear point in her grief. They moved once to arrange one another as big spoon and little spoon on the narrow bed.

Ruth clasped his hands to her heart, and slept in peace. After a while, Theron did, too.

*

Ruth came with Wynston to the border world where Zakuulian knights were mowing down local rebels. The two of them piloted with only the lightest trickle of coordinating dialogue, until at last they reached hyperspace.

Wynston stood to leave. Ruth didn’t. “You’re settling into the work all right?” she said.
Wynston stopped, a shadow in the doorway. "Rather like old times," he said. "Having watched Imperial Intelligence operations for upwards of ten years and been involved in standing up a comparable capability...apart from the fact that I have to do this over again every few years it's almost pleasantly familiar."

"Lana speaks very highly of you."

"Lana is a surprisingly warm personality for someone in her position. It makes me wonder when she'll have cause to regret it."

"She's better prepared than she looks." Ruth said it because she hoped it was true. Lana was older than her but in some ways seemed less jaded about close associates.

"What about you? The work seems to agree with you."

"It's something to do until we have the influence to let me walk openly in Imperial territory. Granted, most intelligence organizations probably already have part of the truth. But it isn't enough for me to walk onto Dromund Kaas and find out...find out where my son went."

"Have you looked for Quinn? I can't believe I'm even suggesting this, but he might have answers."

"No one knows where he went. If he's still in military service it must be one of the branches that went underground to continue the fight for the true Empire. Or did he desert? Or join a paramilitary organization? I still don't know. I can't know." Not even the Force had revealed that yet. Her former husband had vanished as completely as their son.

"When the time comes," said Wynston. "When we uncover something, anything actionable about Rylon. I'll manage things at home long enough for you to do what needs to be done. Just call on me."

Plain. Simple. Selfless. How very like him. "I hope it's soon," she said. "The network you're helping to build with Lana, the informants we get from all directions...I hope it's soon."

"Have I ever told you that you deserve better than what you got?"

"Oh, Wynston. Does it make a difference in a galaxy like this?"

"Hm." He walked away.

*  

"Dammit," said Theron.

"I'm sorry," said Ruth.

The mission was an unqualified disaster. Not just potential allies pulling weapons, but innocents getting caught up in the crossfire. The target shipment being pulled out by the enemy as they fought. And, in the end, Theron gunned down the disarmed ringleader of these potential allies where everyone could see. In the moment when the man was swinging up to attack, yes, but still. They had let the rest go with that warning fresh in their minds. It was that or kill them piecemeal. There hadn't been much of a choice.

Now in the speeder Theron stared straight ahead, his brow knotting up and easing and knotting up again. His mouth was set in a grim line Ruth had never seen from him before. It was genuine, the first thing he couldn't possibly have faked with her. And it hurt to look at. For once, he was human.
She almost wished he weren’t.

All this for something she would have called normal business five years ago.

Theron sighed and looked at her. “You’re pretty quiet.”

“I can live with what just happened,” said Ruth. “But I have a feeling you don’t want me to try to teach you that.”

He stared at her a moment too long before returning his gaze to the lane. “No. I don’t.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry.” Whether for his pain or for her lack of it, she wasn’t sure.

They drove on. Ruth turned the day’s events over in her mind, from start to finish, looking for a way to make it tolerable for a man like the one next to her.

“Theron–”

He scythed across her words with a startling fury. “If I want someone to tell me it was necessary I’ll talk to Lana.”

“And if I tell you it was the right thing?”

“There was no right thing. If I stop believing that I may as well be…”

“Me?”

He flinched. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Survival is a pretty universal standard.”

“He was helpless. Disarmed.”

“Ready to kill with his bare hands.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I can make a good guess.” She watched him wrestle with that. “Listen. If you want I’ll say it was me on the after action report.”

His nostrils flared. “I may be a killer but I’m not a coward. We tell it like it happened.”

“Okay.” But nothing was okay, not really. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry it happened this way.”

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath and didn’t look at her. “So am I.”

Theron was a creature of flesh and blood, and she had just seen him hurt. It unsettled her. She wanted to fix it. But the only way to do so would be to revise the past, and that wasn’t in her power.

If it could be, she’d have done it.

“Let’s just go home,” he mumbled to no one. “Whatever that is.”

* 

“Can you make it?” said Ruth.
“Yes,” said Lana.

The organic components of the Alliance met in the cafeteria: Ruth, Wynston, Lana, Theron, Koth, Senya. Ruth watched Theron anxiously, but he seemed to have recovered from last week's shock. Well, good.

Ruth finished her food in a hurry while everyone else was talking. “I know our schedules rarely line up,” she said. “I wanted to check in. The plan has changed. I’m no longer interested in solutions that preserve the Emperor.”

Lana looked at Wynston. “Good,” she said.

“What? Why?” said Koth. “He’s still the best shot at bringing things back to normal.”

“I know what the Emperor did to Ziost. I will never let him have power again. Wynston…opted not to destroy the Emperor’s vessel while I was down.” This time everyone looked at Wynston. He just looked to Ruth, neither smug nor angry. “But the first chance I see to get him out of my head, I’m taking. And not to get him into his own body.”

“It’s necessary,” said Senya. She said it like permission. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Koth still looked disappointed, but the others were varying degrees of understanding. “There’s something else,” said Ruth. “We all came together pretty quickly. There’s been a lot of friction lately, and I’ve caused my share of it. Tonight we set that aside. I’ve worked with each and every one of you long enough to really believe that our motives line up and our talents are, frankly, second to none. We’ll take Arcann. And anyone else who thinks they can force a war.”

Lana raised her glass. “To the Alliance.”

Ruth touched glasses and looked around the table. Koth directed a grudging but civil toast. Senya looked judiciously pleased. Lana gave her a look like they were finally on solid ground.

Wynston. Forgive me for not believing. And for punching you in the face. He smiled crookedly at her, the way he used to, and drank.

Theron last of all. Forgive me for pushing you away. I hope we can still be in this together. He smiled at her, the relaxed, slightly cocky smile, and it warmed her through. She let herself smile back. The moment was covered in a clatter of glassware, not so important. They were alive and among friends. For a minute or an hour or something she looked at his tawny eyes and couldn't be anything but happy.

“What?” she said vaguely.

“The salt. Please,” said Senya.

The spell snapped. Of course. Ruth shut her mouth and quickly reviewed where the salt was, where Senya was, and where she was. When she dared to look again Theron was busy with his napkin.

But he grinned, just the same.
So Perfect, and So Available

Chapter Summary

Wynston decides to get pretty again, and takes Ruth dancing. Ruth and Theron try canoeing. Ruth finds that someone has been using resources to find her son. Theron offers Ruth something to help her with the next stage of her search. Kissing almost happens. (Wynston, Lana, Ruth, Theron)

Ziost was in the past. Wynston, having delivered the truth, was settling comfortably back into the lies and deception of everyday assignments. Granted, most of those assignments didn’t require lies. It was just more comfortable for him if he provided some. The truth…he had to be careful with that.

He went to Lana.

“Hello,” he said, tapping the flask in his jacket more for reassurance than for any need to drink it.

“Wynston.” That bland cordiality wasn’t her sole leadership quality but it was a good one. “What’s afoot?”

“No games, for the moment. I wanted to have a serious talk.”

Lana Beniko straightened, dusted off her jacket, and gave Wynston the full force of her yellow-eyed attention. “What about?”

“I’ve been holding out on you,” he said.

Lana took that with an oblique nod. “I’m aware,” she said dryly.

“But I want to make it up. Everything at my disposal.”

“After all this time? Why?”

“It would be hard to explain.” Put simply, he was ready to do the right thing the nice way again. “Put simply, it’s time I put all my interests in one basket and you’re the best basket in town.” Okay, so maybe telling the absolute truth could use some work. It didn’t come naturally.

She half smiled. “Why do I think I should be flattered?”

“I’ve never flattered you nearly enough.” Habit, that. “Oh, and one more thing. I’m going to arrange some surgery.”

“Cybernetics?”

“Not quite.” He touched the scar that ran from forehead to cheek. “I held onto it because I deserved it. But it’s about time I stopped scaring people with my face.”

Lana smiled. “I’ve seen the one holo my staff could decrypt. You’ve always been quite handsome.”

“You mean I used to be and might be again. Now I’m flattered.”
“You’re one of our least expensive agents. You’ve probably more than offset the cost of surgery.”

“See? I knew I’d be useful.” He cracked a crooked smile. “We’ll schedule when it makes sense, of course.”

“Will you want more people-facing jobs?”

“More than zero? Yes. Let’s see how they put me back together before we make any firm commitments.”

It was something to look forward to.

*

Wynston paced the lightly humming halls of the Ministry of Corrections II. He had looked in the mirror once since surgery, as the doctors had snuck one up on him. He already knew what he looked like. What, to his mind, he had always looked like. The scar over forehead and cheek was a temporary accident for a few years. Now he was Wynston again. Smarter, more cautious. But Wynston nevertheless.

He paced his ship’s halls, reflecting casually on each sip of a tall cold drink, and practiced keeping a calm face.

On Odessen he walked with his head high and a swing in his step. It didn’t hurt to show off a little energy. He went to the cantina and scanned the booths. He spotted more or less who he had expected: Lana, Theron, and Ruth.

All three stared.

The little upturn of Ruth’s mouth was there in full force. “Wynston,” she said. “You look great.”

“I knew I was having a good hair day,” he said, allowing for a grin that was in danger of becoming a smile.

She bounded to her feet. He hardly flinched at all when she hugged him. Abruptly she tensed. “You are Wynston, right? Because if this is anyone else we are going to have a problem.”

“It’s me,” he assured her, stepping back with a light grip on her arms. “Listen, I was thinking about getting back into practice dancing. Care to be my victim?” He remembered every movement, every necessary touch. He just hadn’t played it for an audience in far, far too long. He wanted a friendly one.

Something young flickered in her eyes. “I’d love to,” she said, and took his arm. Just a man, pretty but not incriminatingly memorable, with a lovely woman on his arm. Together they headed for the dance floor.

*

Theron and Lana sat.

“So,” said Theron. “They’re close.”

“Not in the way you might think,” said Lana. “Though all bets may be off if he’s changed his attitude as much as it appears.”
“He’ll get over it. He’ll be back to glaring daggers and talking about the fundamental cynicism of the galaxy before you know it.”

The conversation limped a little. Still, it was nice to unwind.

Some unspecified period of time later, because Theron didn’t notice what time it was or anything, Ruth breezed back, bright-eyed. “That man is off to break someone’s heart,” she sighed.

Theron eyed the doorway, then the Sith. “But not yours?”

“We’ve reached an understanding,” she said. “After this he’s on his own.”

“I didn’t know you danced at all.” Frankly he had had trouble imagining it, and even more trouble watching it.

Her eyes widened ever so slightly. Guilt? “Ordinarily I don’t. I’m not very good and it wouldn’t do to have the Emperor’s Wrath making a fool of herself.”

“Maybe. But you’re not that Wrath anymore.”

“No, I would just be me making a fool of myself. I only did that as a special favor.”

“The facelift seems to have agreed with him,” said Lana.

“It’s almost like having him back.” Ruth caught herself. “Stars. Don’t tell him I said that. It’s just nice to see a smile on his face.”

Senya walked in. She stopped, eyeing Ruth with some concern. “Hello,” she said. “You look… happy.”

“I just danced for the first time in ten years.” She fairly gleamed. “Oh! So, what did I miss? Anything good?”

“We were discussing the Eternal Empire’s critical points,” said Lana. “It would be helpful if we could only strike a nerve.”

Ruth nodded. “In terms of military dispositions, or in terms of the man up top? So what does he care about? Who would give us leverage? He doesn’t seem to mourn his father any.”

“And he would give nothing for his sister,” Senya said reflectively, “except perhaps revenge. Remember that he killed his brother. Vaylin is not our way in.”

“Somewhere, someone must have shaped him.” She looked at the door. “Maybe in ways nobody expected. But maybe in ways that last.”

*

Ruth found herself interested in the ever-expanding developments of the Odessen complex. It was the alliance’s sole safe space for training and refitting. It pushed out the wilderness on all sides as it grew. However, people were starting to talk about preserving parks, saving some spaces for recreation outside the span of comconsoles and garages. It gave Ruth an idea.

The idea also had to do with cheering Theron up, which made it doubly attractive. She wasn’t sure why this mattered. He had been kind once, so surely something in return was all right.

It was a long shot but not, she thought, a hopeless one. She found him in the cantina and spent a
pleasant few minutes chattering with the circle that had gathered there. In time Theron peeled away. Ruth followed him.

“I had a question,” she said in the hallway. “Strictly friendly.”

He smiled. He did have a pleasant smile. “All right. Strictly friendly answer. What’s up?”

“Have you ever been canoeing?”

“You mean, with a boat? On water?” He seemed to liven up, a good sign. “I have. Have you?”

“Not as such. Would you have a couple hours to teach me?”

His eyebrows crept up, yet another thing that didn’t seem faked. “Is this some clever combat trick nobody’s told me about?”

“No. Just something to do in our spare time while we still have some.”

He looked thoughtful for a minute. But the very next day, he came with her.

The day was warm and sunny. The location was accessible via a somewhat bumpy speeder ride: a wide lake, actually the one that the waterfall in the complex eventually fed. It was shallow and blue, sparkling in the sunlight. There was a grassy island in the middle, possessed of a couple of windblown trees that looked like they were rethinking their location.

Theron gripped one end of the canoe where it hung beside the speeder. “One, two–” he said. Ruth hefted the canoe out of his hands. “Right, or that,” he said cheerfully, and followed her to the pebbled shore.

She set it down by the water and eyed the windy ripples. “Socks off, then,” she said.

“I’m afraid so.”

She stood in her boots. She glared at him. He stared back, the wind wrapping his jacket tight over his torso, his hair starting to fray. Of course she didn’t notice that kind of thing.

He grinned. “Look, if I see you without your boots, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Fine.” She started peeling off her boots. Socks followed. Theron set down a large package in the middle of the canoe, then kicked his own shoes off. “Next part’s easy. Just get it in the water – slowly – and you climb in while I hold.” The canoe was a weird halfway flexible thing and it bobbed when Ruth stepped in. She eased in past the package.

“Have a seat, it helps with the balance.” He nudged the canoe into the water and jumped in as it slid free of the lake bottom. “Right. One paddle apiece. Plant and push. Resistance is good, it means you’re getting somewhere.”

She planted. She pushed. The canoe tilted hard and swung halfway around.

Theron pulled his oar free of the water and laughed. “Okay, we’ll need to work on balancing.” They did, too. It only took a few strokes to strike a balance, easy progress in the sun.

The wind calmed a little when they reached the island. Theron guided them straight up onto the grassy edge and held the canoe steady while Ruth and the package disembarked.

“Draw it up a little further. There. Not too bad, huh?”
“What’s in the box?”

“That’s for me to know and you to haul around all day.”

She stared at him. She deliberately pulled the cover off the box.

“Careful,” he said, and ran to intercept as she set it down. Together without quite touching they unwrapped a bright yellow sheet from a cooler. Inside, water, cold caf, and a selection of sandwiches that Ruth half suspected might be an attempt to find out what kind of sandwich she liked. She had half of everything, just to keep him off balance.

“Should’ve asked this earlier,” Theron said, eyeing the forest around them.

“Asked what?”

“Can you swim?”

“Sure I can. Probably. It’s not difficult, right, you just flail and eventually you get somewhere?”

Theron had stopped chewing. He stared. He swallowed. Then he burst out laughing. “Are you for real? Can you at least walk on water?”

“That sounds like Force levitation, which is far, far more difficult than most people imagine.”

“You eat difficult things for breakfast.”

“Well, when did you learn to swim?”

“There was a pond on Tython. And you could keep up in the pools on Coruscant. I didn’t, much, but I could.”

“You think I should walk on water?”

“I think it could be fun to try.”

She brushed crumbs from her mouth and stood. The wind was picking up again. “Fine,” she said, and opened her awareness to the Force. It was rich here on Odessen, she could give it that much. She slid her thoughts over the choppy water. If only a little bit of energy would be applied in the right face...like Force pushing somebody, only the somebody was the entire surface of this lake.

One step. Her bare foot felt strangely warm while the waves tickled it. Another. Wholly on the water now, and it was taking all her focus to preserve those hard spots of air under her feet. A third. She tried hopping further for a fourth. She swung forward for another--

Things stopped cooperating. She wobbled and fell into the cold chop. Her squeak lasted exactly until the bulk of her body hit the cold. She splashed and flailed. Flailing was supposed to help. Her toes hit a rock, hard, and then she was getting her feet under her. Strong hands had her upper arms, and through a combination of scuffling and dragging the two of them made it to shore and fell down on the grassy incline. Ruth spat and gagged and laughed, too hard to control, and Theron was pushing her wet hair from her face and wrapping an arm around her waist and leaning over her, laughing too, his tawny eyes just a little concerned but his whole chest heaving from the absurdity.

They looked at each other then. His breath on her mouth was the only warm thing in the world. She shivered head to toe and toe to head again. Here was safety. Only...
Ruth’s eyes were bluer than the sky here, brighter than the water, and currently locked on Theron’s. She had come such, such a long way from that mask, and such a long way from that sorrow.

“You okay?” he said. Her side under her mussed and sopping shirt was shockingly warm.

She laughed, that rare throaty laugh that brought out a dimension she didn’t show to just anyone. “I’m fine,” she said. “Swimming is harder than I expected.”

“If I drowned the Outlander I would never hear the end of it.” Why had she asked him here? Was this, slow, imminent, heady, what she wanted? He shifted his attention to her full lips and leaned in. “Ruth…”

“Don’t,” she said with sudden urgency. “Oh, stars.” Her eyes were round and strained while her hands flew to his chest and shoulder and pushed, not at her full strength. “I can’t do this. Theron, I’m sorry.”

Reluctantly he withdrew his arm. “What do you have to be sorry for? We went out and had a nice time away from work for once. Didn’t even drown. That doesn’t seem so bad.”

“No. We can’t just make this a side benefit.” The rosy color had drained from her face. With a quiet moue of realization she snatched her hands back and wound them around one another. “No. You are so perfect, and so available, and I can’t ever do that again.”

He asked the dazzling question, not the right one. “You think I’m perfect?”

Her confusion twisted and crystallized into something of the commanding poise she carried her job with. She balled her fists at her sides, the smallest flex of an undeniable power. “I can’t. It’s my problem, not yours, but it is a problem. Good day, Theron.”

“We’re coming back the same way.”

“Of course. Dammit.” She grasped the canoe and waited for him to board. They rowed in tacit synchronization but she didn’t look at him again, all the way back to base.

* 

mmm

This is how Theron thought about it going:

She didn’t stop. She didn’t stop at all.

“You sure you’re all right?” he said.

“Not counting the blow to my pride. If anybody asks about this, I fell in the dead center of the lake. Ten meters deep. With sharks. It was a hard-won battle.”

He laughed. “I’m just glad we got you in time.”

She returned his smile. A last ripple of laughter escaped her. “Theron…” She reached up and touched his drying face with light fingertips. “Imagine for a moment that I just had a near-death experience, with sharks, and I’m terribly, terribly grateful.”

He leaned down. She closed the last of the distance herself, her mouth searing hot, her hands suddenly gripping his soaked shirt with an urgency that took his breath away. He had to compete
with her ravenous energy as she turned him onto his back. She pushed at his jacket, too heavy here anyway, running her hands over him as if to memorize him before their breath ran out and the spell was lifted. He slid his hands up her wrists and skipped to her lean hard waist which surrendered not an inch to his questing fingers, firm and perfect. He ran his hands up, sliding, spreading in a madness of droplets, to the subtle swell of her breasts…

But she didn’t want that, did she? She’d just said as much to his face.

Well, she hadn’t said she didn’t want him, not exactly. Actually she’d said the opposite. Perfect. Available. What part of that was bad?

A Sith thing? Or just her?

Whatever. He could let her go. Or stay professional. In fact he should probably think about seeing other people. Who, he wasn’t sure. His social life here on Odessen was about the sparse mess it had been while he was an itinerant agent for the SIS. Well…he could sort something out. And Ruth would be Ruth, unstoppable in action, forever distant in inaction.

Just…for one leaping-heart moment, he’d thought he’d broken through.

* *

Wynston was in a corner booth. He usually was, when there was no one else to sit with, going through drinks at a steady and inexhaustible rate. Theron watched sometimes as the Chiss returned to work. He always stayed balanced.

“Good evening,” said Theron, bringing his glass with him.

Wynston gave Theron a bland smile. “Hello,” he said. “Everything go all right out there?”

“What? Yeah, the latest expedition was fine. How’re…things?”

“Mercifully free of small talk. What can I do for you, Mr. Shan?”

Well, time for it. Theron set down his drink. “You’ve been friends with the Outlander for a long time.”

Wynston shrugged one shoulder. “Excepting that gap in the middle, yes.”

“She seems professional.”

The Chiss’s smile chilled the table between them. “There is no idle curiosity about Ruth. Either you give yourself to her or you leave her the hell alone.”

Theron blinked. “That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s exactly dramatic enough. I don’t know you well, Theron Shan, a fact that I’m sure causes you little distress, but I mean to. Because for all her myriad strengths she’s not the best judge of character. She follows her heart with everything she has. And everything she has is enough to shake worlds.” Wynston leaned over, his eyebrows pulling low. “Do not disturb that unless you’re sure.”

“She inspires loyalty. I can see that. And if you think I’m immune, you’re mistaken.”

“I should very much like to be mistaken about you, Mr. Shan.”
“All this, just because I asked?” Theron reclaimed his drink, not bothering to hide his scowl. “I guess I don’t know what I was expecting to get out of this.”

“Advice. On how to woo her, or perhaps merely be an adequate friend – something she has far too few of. I have no advice, except to be yourself, and be bloody sure yourself can be relied upon. I’ve seen her heart broken. I have no intention of allowing it to happen again.”

* 

Weeks passed.

Ruth had to holo. It made her want to yell. At Wynston. He was making himself indispensable, on Odessen, out in the field, with combinations of people whom he mixed into effective teams. It was just hard to sit down and talk to him for ten minutes.

“Ruth,” said his holo image, imperturbable as ever. He was looking so much better than he had when they met. He had kept the close dark blue crew cut, but he was carrying himself straighter, making eye contact, wearing well-cut dark clothes that flattered his wiry frame. And he wasn’t clutching a blaster. “What can I do for you?”

“I need to meet with you. I’ve received some reports having to do with…with people looking for Rylon.”

“What people?”

“I don’t know. But I think whoever sent them is friendly.”

“Tell me where to go.”

Ruth had the glossy printouts for him when they met outside her quarters. He flicked over the first three. They didn’t have much information, truth be told; only the knowledge that an effort was being mounted to find a black-haired Force-sensitive boy of influential parentage.

Wynston frowned at them. “These are SIS-formatted reports,” he said in a low voice.

“Wynston, don’t joke about that.”

“I’m not. He wasn’t trying very hard to cover his tracks.”

Theron. Former SIS, perhaps not as estranged as advertised. “I wouldn’t have known. I don’t think most people would.”

“You do now.” His brow twitched. “May I ask what you want to do about it?”

Ruth bit her lip. She thought about it, honestly, seriously. About the things Theron had said to her, and the looks he had given her. "I want to tell him to stop. But I don’t, not if he’s got the slightest chance at bringing Rylon back to me. I want it to not feel like a debt. But I don’t care how much debt it incurs if it brings my son back. I want this to come with no strings attached. But damn the strings, Wynston, if Theron can find him…I would give anything.”

“Your integrity? I’ve done that on occasion. It leaves a funny taste in the mouth. And I think he would crush him to realize it.”

“I don’t care. Not if it means getting closer to my child.”

He looked at her. “I understand.” He leaned forward, the scent of his last drink brushing the very
edges of smell. “But you in love never worried this much.”

“Me in love was a child, Wynston. The world’s gotten complicated.” Late, perhaps too late, came the realization. “Would you go through all this with every man who comes my way?”

The smile crept wider for just a moment. “Until you remind me that you don’t need the protection. I’m no longer competing, Ruth, that gives me a nice disinterested seat from which to criticize anyone stupid enough to think he deserves you.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but…may I ask why you’re on the sidelines?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Does it bother you?”

Her ego had lost all touch with whether people found her attractive a long time ago. “No. I’m just curious.”

“You are beautiful, brilliant, strong, talented, generous, and a profoundly decent woman.” He touched where his scar had been, consciously or otherwise. “But the world’s gotten complicated,” he said. “You knew me as a boy, which I don’t mind, but I can’t forget it.”

And other women didn’t know how much he had changed. Ruth had to concentrate to keep a wry little smile up. “Should I be critiquing any woman arrogant enough to think she’s good enough for you?”

The smile stayed this time. “The interrogation of the Outlander, a small price to pay for the prize of loving me. I doubt it will be a problem anytime soon.”

“Let me know. I’ll keep the knives sharp.”

He laughed, a sound much younger than his years. “Your first weapons out are always your words. Please be kind, I was hoping to meet a woman I’m not getting killed at some point in my career.”

“Excluding me again?” she said, touching her shirt where it lay over the edge of the scarring. An old mission, that, but unforgettable.

“You survived.” His warmth set the room aglow. “That’s how I knew we would get along.”

*  

Ruth was not good at skulking.

Theron felt for her, just watching. She stayed quiet at council, hung behind everyone, and in particular was always not quite falling in line with him.

So he saved her the trouble one morning and caught her passing the cantina.

She jolted to a stop, staring. Those clear blue eyes were girlish even when the rest of her wasn’t. “Theron,” she said her voice unnaturally firm.

“Ruth,” he said, and tried a smile.

She blushed. “Thank you for your efforts.”

Even knowing what she was referring to he felt some generalized guilt. “Uh, which ones specifically?”
“You got the SIS on my son’s case.”

“I stripped the letterhead from those reports.” Did no one pay attention when he was going undercover?

“You didn’t change the formatting.”

“All right.” He swallowed. “Yes. I asked some connections to do some digging. I was hoping they already had him in their back pocket somewhere. Leverage against the Wrath or something.” To someone who had showed the pain she had that effort seemed pathetic. “I don’t know, maybe that was stupid.”

“It means everything that you tried.”

“To be honest I don’t know much about good parenting. But I can see what missing him is costing you. If there’s anything else I can do…”

Something fled from her eyes. “Theron, I can’t ask…you already do too much.”

*

Ruth did all that wrong. This is how she thought about it going:

“It means everything that you tried.”

“To be honest I don’t know much about good parenting.” The humor in those eyes had a certain charm. “But I can see what missing him is costing you. If there’s anything else I can do…”

Direct. Make it what they both knew. She grabbed his jacket and leaned in to kiss him, his lips soft and startling even when she knew it would happen.

He didn’t question her. He didn’t make it complicated. He didn’t trouble her with thoughts of earning and deserving. He locked his arms around her and kissed her back.

“Have you considered,” he muttered against her lips, his tawny eyes darting from side to side, “a little privacy?”

“Overrated,” she told his mouth. He backed her against the railing and she arched, falling backwards where he could follow, begging him to follow.

He pulled her back. “No,” he breathed. “Definitely going to need privacy.” He slipped an arm around her waist and started walking, laughing as she tried to keep hopping up to plant kisses on his moving cheek.

But things weren’t supposed to work that way, or something? Ruth didn’t know anymore. Intimacy had always been the absolute opposite of her strong point.

“I should go,” she said, and did.
Theron thought Ruth was better at the next conversation. For instance the next time he came in from one of the outlying landing pads. She was practicing lightsaber forms, her style ever economical, characterized not by flash but by the tremendous intention of every movement. He hated to interrupt her, only he had to get back to base.

She deactivated her sabers as he approached. “Welcome home,” she said. Oddly she wasn’t quite meeting his eye.

“Is that what this is?” He grinned. “Good to see you.”

She seemed pleased by that. “Question for you, Theron.”

“Answer for you, Ruth. Though I don’t have any extra insights about the assignment.”

“No. I just thought…that is…I was thinking.” She gestured and they walked on together. “About our relative origins.”

“Sun and skylanes versus jungle and storms?” He’d seen the profile notes about Dromund Kaas. “I imagine there was a healthy contrast.”

“But you liked the SIS. Control segment and all?”

“For a long time HQ was home. I couldn’t sneak back there now. Not and not get caught.” He considered, resolving into a cocky grin. “Well. I could. But there’s no time for it.”

“What did it look like? The height of Coruscanti fashion?”

“Oh, no, way more blue and display screens. There’s this trashy holo show, Dangerous Liaisons, that almost gets it right. I think they actually bought furniture from one of HQ’s purges and used it on set.”

“I see. I always imagined Imperial Intelligence being all black and red and ominous. I think yours was much nicer.”

“Probably so. Not that there’s anything wrong with Odessen. Industrial chic.”

Ruth laughed. It was a throaty, generous sound, free of her usual reservation. “I’ll keep it in mind. Come on, we’d better get moving.”

“What’s the rush?” he said, glad to have the time alone with her.
She arched her eyebrows. “I don’t know, but I’m betting we’ll find out when we get in there.”

“Ha. Good point.”

*

The droid sky troopers were everywhere, and the external bombardment was making a glass-flying mess of the great hall.

“Ruth, pull back!” Theron kept firing. Ruth bounded back to his side and spun to start deflecting blaster fire at the attacking droids.

That’s when the ceiling at the far end started to go.

Ruth looked around. One exit off in the corner. The ceiling was crumbling, peeling down toward them, rafter after rafter snapping and falling. The wreckage buried the droids along a long, inevitable front that was coming straight toward them.

Theron holstered his blaster, spun, and pushed Ruth against the wall, hunching his shoulders over her and bracing her sides in his arms. Anything that hit them was going to hit him.

She shook her head heard to get it out from under his chin. Peering awkwardly around him, she raised her hands from within and under his own arms and started the hardest Force concentration she had had to make in a long time. The ceiling creaked. The falling wreckage slowed and started falling at an angle, crushing the last of the droids rather than falling onto where Ruth and Theron stood tense and tangled.

There was a moment’s silence.

Theron looked up and around without moving away. “Yeah,” he said. “I remembered you could do that. No sweat.”

She wanted very much to stay in his arms anyway. But there was no excuse for that. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah.” He looked down at her.

“Yeah.” She looked up at him.

A final chunk of metal wobbled and fell from the mountain of debris. Ruth shook herself and moved on.

*

The room was in Odessen’s base, just around the corner from the cantina. As Theron watched, bemused, Ruth opened the place up to reveal a smallish sort of living room. It was furnished in stunning taste, shades of blue and gold in comfortable chairs and a couple of HoloNet stations angled to where the user could view a large holoprojector in the floor. There was a coat rack by the door and a double set of shelves wrapping the walls from doorway all the way around to doorway. Those shelves were currently empty.

“What is this?” he said.

“If the cantina ever gets too noisy. I’m trying to sell this as an officers’ lounge.” She smiled. She
was looking much better. “I didn’t hit the SIS vibe too much, did I?”

“No. No, if somebody who actually thought about interior decorating took the color scheme and made it tolerable, it’d begin to be something like this. But this is nice.”

“But my work. I brought in outside help.” But she wasn’t done. “It still needs decorating.” She pulled out a plastiboard box and opened it to show a little snow globe with a tiny castle inside. “One for every planet we visit, I’m thinking.”

He looked up at the wraparound shelf. “All that?”

“I don’t think we’ll have any trouble filling it.”

“Maybe not. We could get the others to help.”

“Anyone’s welcome here. I’m inviting Koth and Lana and the rest to help fill things in.”

He rubbed his neck and made a brief face. “Is this what putting down roots is like?”

“I guess we’ll both have to find out. You like it?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his neck once more and grinned. “Yeah, I do.”

*Lana. You’re a woman.*

Lana looked up from the lounge couch and set her datapad aside. “According to all recent estimates.”

Theron made a pained face. His hair had fallen into disrepair somewhere along the way. And he hadn’t even been working. “I’m going somewhere with this. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Very good friends.”

“And you’re Sith.”

“Is there a pattern emerging that I can’t see?”

“I have to ask. Sith, they can do – I mean, involvements. Short-term involvements. That’s something some of you do.”

“Some of us, yes. We are encouraged to use our passions as fuel.”

Theron arched his modded eyebrow. “You’ve never said what fuels you.”

“No,” she said with a smile. “I never have.”

“I…can’t even start that now. I was just…wondering.”

“Take a breath and sit down, Theron.”

He sat down hard on an ottoman and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. His hands opened and closed and opened. “Do Sith experience…attraction…differently?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never not been Sith.”
“We hear the same stories. We go to the same places. It stands to reason we would respond to the same things. Right?”

“Individual taste reigns. You know that.” She paused. He didn’t volunteer anything. “Love drives us as it drives anyone. Some of our greatest deeds – and our most foolhardy – are inspired by it.”

Theron threw up his hands. “And then there’s the power thing. Don’t you always know that one or the other person has the advantage? Doesn’t that overshadow everything?”

“Some abuse it. Some people prefer that dynamic. Force-blind and Force-sensitive. Others treat it more like one person being taller or healthier – a quirk to be lived with.”

“So it’s possible for something real to happen even when there’s an imbalance.”

“If you’re really asking me whether Sith are capable of relationships based on mutual trust and admiration, the answer is yes.” It was too painful watching him wrestle with this. Bizarrely endearing, but painful. “You know about her former husband?”


It was one of the few topics that got Wynston, of all people, talking. Lana had taken notes as a matter of course. “She was deeply in love and her love betrayed her. He showed up at a convenient time, made himself indispensable. She fell hard only to find out that his loyalty was to his old master. She cast him off and went her own way, sadder but wiser. That’s the shadow of Yavin we met.”

“Convenient timing.” Theron looked at his boots. “Yeah. That’s me.”

“Personally I think she’s waiting for someone to put her first - not the mission, not even the greater good, but her. Selfish, of course. I can’t encourage you to pursue her that way.”

“Yeah,” said Theron. “Yeah, that would be dumb. Thanks, Lana.”

“Theron, if she’s ever done anything to lead you on…” She was a little surprised at the intensity of the thought. “She’ll have me to deal with.”

“Let’s skip the arms race.” He smiled unconvincingly. “It’s fine. It’s probably safer this way.”

*  

Wynston ended up with Lana Beniko a lot. She seemed to have an unending disdain for his trusty flask but was otherwise tolerable. No Keeper, of course, but then, who was? Having worked with Imperial Intelligence in the past she could reminisce. And talk in his language about the challenges to come. And she didn’t seem too crazed, for a Sith.

Wynston stretched and relaxed in one of the office seats. Lana sat opposite him. They had run through the logistics of the following day’s operations; now they had only to wait.

“I’d like to ask you a personal question,” Wynston said idly.

Lana sat with her customary poise. “Oh? I suppose you’ve earned that much.”

“What drives you? I haven’t been able to see. What Sith passion is it that keeps you running?”
“My responsibilities,” Lana said crisply. “No one else can do my duty to protect this galaxy. So I must.”

Wynston frowned at nothing in particular. “You are a very good liar, and I hope you take that as the compliment it is, but there are some things you say that objectively cannot be true. That’s one of them. Something drives you to reach higher and burn brighter than any of what I might laughingly call your peers. Something that lends you the sort of strength any other Sith might envy. And yet not a one of us knows what it is. That’s a narrow line to walk, and you do it well. So what’s the secret?”

She only looked pleased for a fraction of a second. “As long as we’re picking apart motives, what about you? You’re driven yourself, more so than most Force-blinds.”

Wynston shrugged. “I’m a simple man of simple motivations. I want my friends to be comfortable and my enemies to be un-. That’s no great secret.”

Lana smiled. Her yellow eyes were hard as nails. “How hard are you working right now to shut me out of your emotions?”

“Oh, was I? Habit.” He smiled blandly. “Shall we move on?”

“Yes, let’s.”

*

Wynston walked out and found Senya in ops. She was twisting in a way that suggested she intended to look like she was just passing by.

“Hear anything good?” he said dryly.

“Only riddles,” said Senya. “Lana isn’t the only one who wonders about you.”

“Tell me I’m not the only one who wonders about Lana.”

“Hm.” Senya crossed her arms over her chest. “I put my cards on the table. I seem to be the only one to have done so.”

“Ruth’s pretty transparent.”

“Minus the minor detail of Valkorion in her head. But yes. She seems open now.”

“She is. It’s one of her weaknesses. I sincerely hope you never have to use it.”

“She has nothing to fear from me. I couldn’t defeat her in battle and I cannot take her child away. What else would hurt? No. I think she understands more than any of you what must happen. And what it will cost.”

“To be honest, Senya, I don’t know whether you want to make that strike, or whether you want one of us to.”

“We have to take any chance we get. That goes for both of us. In a fair fight my children would obliterate you. But there’s room in this war for…cheating. For better or worse.”

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry.”
“There’ll be time for pity when this is over.” Senya set her jaw. “Good day, Wynston.”

*

Ruth sat on her bed and bent over her knees, cradling her aching head in her hands. It had been another intense night.

No Theron. That was correct. He belonged to the mission. Wasn’t she tired of that? She remembered being eighteen and stupid, remembered every single night after Quinn’s yes. That yes had felt like the apex of a lifetime.

And, too, she remembered him taking out a blaster and firing at her.

People in political positions like this couldn’t just be in love. Ruth couldn’t just be in love. It wasn’t safe.

No Theron. He could be kind, yes, and handsome, and brave, and resourceful, and always, always there for her, and why was a precise replay of her past so tempting? She had loved once, and it had cost her more than just her tattered heart. Why couldn’t she shake the feel of Theron’s hand on her side, his breath on her lips? Why was it that making him smile was a policy requirement of the Alliance?

Stupid, stupid child. She’d had twenty-three years in this world, not counting the freeze, and apparently that wasn’t enough to know better. Was it sexy that he wasn’t afraid of her? Or did it mean he didn’t take her seriously, the way everyone in this galaxy had better take her seriously? Did he think he had this one in the bag? When exactly was he planning to hurt her?

No Theron. She wanted him. That was the horrible confession. She wanted him so much she could barely see straight, and these platonic exchanges of favors wouldn’t be platonic forever, couldn’t be. The strain would kill them. Because, the other horrible confession, she knew this was tearing at him, too. How many men had really wanted her…ever? Wynston was sweet, but he would make love to a lamppost if he thought he heard it say yes. Even Quinn hadn’t talked himself into involvement with Ruth for a long time. Maybe it was over his own disgust; her usefulness would’ve been enough to sustain that farce regardless of his personal feelings. She could live with herself alone, that was more or less what she had expected from being Sith; but to live this close to someone who could do so much…right up until the mission said otherwise.

She was the Outlander. Maybe she was the mission. Maybe this time it really was intrinsic in her. Maybe she wouldn’t have to regret touching him. Maybe he would do this for her, just her, only her, for once her. Maybe…

No, Theron. She kneaded her temples. If he didn’t drive her crazy her dreams of him would. She tried to wipe the phantom handprint off her flank and couldn’t. She sighed and went for the refresher. One cold shower, coming up.

*

Rylon was three years old, a rounded image of his father. The only thing he seemed to have in common with Ruth was his Force affinity…and the way he laughed.

Rylon was three years old, playing in the living room of the Niral estate on Dromund Kaas. Ruth swept him up in her arms and he squealed and giggled. The hard work of training him against the world was for another day. Today he was her son and she his mother, and that was all the family she needed.
Until his face changed at the height of her swing. It got leaner, older, as something yanked him out of her grip. The room whirled away in a flurry of darkness. And Rylon, his tiny beloved face, was gone, still crying for her, out of sight.

She woke up and was dragged upright by the furious efforts of her heart to escape her chest. There was nothing in her hands, nothing in her arms, no couches, no home…Rylon was gone. Five years gone.

Five years gone.

* 

Ruth requisitioned full rations and fuel for her Fury. She wasn’t sure where her search would take her and she had no desire to be delayed en route by supply issues. She also had no desire to be intercepted by any of the staff here; she sat by the launch pad and waited impatiently for the mechanics and deliverymen to do their work.

She almost made it out clean. Then Theron Shan appeared on the walkway and started toward her with intent.

She brought her chin up and glared. “I know what you’re going to say, Theron. Don’t.”

“Going to Dromund Kaas?” He pulled something from his jacket. It was gold with some dark fabric hanging off it. As he turned it to display it proved to be a mask with shaded eyes and a third eye raised in relief in the center of the forehead.

“You might need to go incognito,” he said. “And the Wrath’s mask is a little too well-known.”

“Theron…” She felt safer just looking at it. Someplace to hide, something she could take with her to avoid being greeted as the Wrath everyone wanted a look at. She took it into her hands and it was cool metal and silken fabric. “Theron,” she said again, weakly, and couldn’t think of anything else to say. Heart fluttering, she took a step forward, grabbed his shirt, and tugged him down into a brief startling kiss.

He didn’t pull away. “Ruth…”

“Yes?” she whispered.

“Just…” his jaw worked…“save it.” He backed up, and every inch seemed to cost him. “When it happens, if it happens, I want you to be kissing me, not the things I’ve done for you. The way to cut that ambiguity is to stop doing things for you, but I can’t do that, so…I’ll wait.”

Her mouth wavered out of her control. Was he rejecting her? After all that tension, what it cost her to even try? “I don’t understand.”

“You will, I hope. It’s okay.” Her body was screaming at her to cut through this stupid sentiment and pour together all the months of indecision, but no, she couldn’t. His eyes were warm and full of concern. The duration of her mission arched high and cavernous around. The prospect of losing Theron or being lost to him echoed throughout it.

She hadn’t let go of the mask. “I want this back in one piece,” he said, touching her hands against it.

“You’ll get it,” she said. “I promise.” In truth she didn’t know what else to give him.
Ruth flew her Fury directly to the pad within the Niral estate. The place had lain empty for...for how long? The old security was almost certainly gone. Maybe there were squatters, or else trophy-hunters. But surely nothing her sabers or voice could not deal with.

Rather than take the tunnel into the house she crept through the overgrown garden. Even in disrepair it felt like a piece of her lost soul. Around the pond, through the lilies, onto the verandah and into the back door. She kept her sabers dark and silent. Inside the lights warmed to brilliance at her approach. Just like coming home all those late nights after work.

The world shifted grey.

“Your refuge,” Valkorion said reflectively. He looked down the hallway as if surveying a prospective conquest.

“Here’s where I went when I wasn’t working for you.”

“You were always working for me. This was your illusion of choice.”

“My son was not an illusion.”

“Oh? Perhaps not. I understand that now.” Quietly, clinically, “Do you believe he’ll remember you?”

He had been three. He would be nine now. “He must,” she said through numb lips.

“Ah. Let us continue.”

Ruth checked the bedrooms. Here the lights were out. Nowhere was there the shape of a person. Only a fine layer of dust on top of everything. She withdrew and rounded the corner into the living room – and bit back a scream. A tall humanoid droid stood amidst the familiar chairs. Its eyes glowed.

It turned its head toward Ruth.

“Greetings, my lord,” it said in a cheerful feminine voice. “I have waited a long time for this directive. Tell me, do you wish to discuss the whereabouts of little Rylon?”
Got What You Needed?

Chapter Summary

Ruth asks a Sith for news of her son. She finds that Theron took his own approach to the mission. They disagree, loudly, back home, but something is resolved between them. (Ruth, Scythia, Theron, Lana)

Ruth clutched her lightsaber and looked around. “Who do you belong to? What do you know of the family here?”

The droid in her living room still sounded cheerful. “I will accompany you to Kaas City. You will find answers there.”

“Who owns you, droid?”

“I am not authorized to discuss my master. Come. I will accompany you.”

Ruth had no choice, not if this droid's owner had news of her son. She led the droid back to her Fury. Together they flew to Kaas City spaceport. Ruth set her ship down and followed the droid, her stomach knotting all the way.

*

The tower the droid directed the taxi to was one of the grander ones, a knife held to the sky in a perpetual threat. Now and again lightning licked it in a fitful display of celestial bravado.

Ruth felt the darkness from the landing pad all the way up the lift. There were precious few Force users in the Empire who could claim such a presence. Of them, there was only one Ruth feared.

And yes. The apartment – no, the whole floor – belonged to Darth Scythia.

The mask Theron had provided had made Ruth feel a little less naked en route. But inside she knew it wouldn’t hide her for long. The droid ushered her into a richly appointed sitting room. Heavy velvet curtains muffled the sounds of the storm outside. The shelves were littered with curios and an extensive collection of what looked like holocrons. Information: Darth Scythia’s weapon of choice.

Though her Force lightning was notorious, too.

Ruth didn’t touch anything. The less she did here, the fewer surprises she might run into. Scythia was not known for entertaining houseguests; as a corollary she was not known for letting them leave unchanged.

Ruth sat on a shallow couch of wrought phobium and red satin, and waited.

And waited.

In time she started thinking out how to fight the legend. Darth Scythia was well known for killing, but most of her victims were Force-blinds or apprentices. She rarely went up against fellow Darths.
She must have some weakness, then. Her Force power might not suffice against a highly Force
resistant, strong, and lightsaber-trained opponent.

She could hope.

But she wasn’t here for combat, was she? Only for information. If Darth Scythia had bothered
planting a summons in Ruth’s home she had to know something about Ruth’s missing son. Unless
she had only laid that trap to confirm her survival? Maybe Scythia already had what she wanted:
the missing Wrath in the palm of her hand.

Stupid, stupid.

Ruth waited in an agony of ignorance. If her hostess had no news of Rylon she would die for this
waste of time. Against anyone else that would sound excessive. Against Scythia it had the ring of
justice.

And then the door opened. And there was the woman in the flesh, short, olive-green, with a high
bun of black hair teased out into curling tendrils around her face. She wore an ankle-length gown
of shimmering black. Her slippers rested on the deep carpet as though she were floating.

“A new mask?” she purred. That sultry voice had held many a Dark Council meeting spellbound.
“Didn’t you used to have a black one, Lord Wrath?”

One professional to another, they couldn’t hide. “A wardrobe change is allowed every few years.”

“But of course. It’s been a long time since Yavin, since any of our dealings. Let me be the first to
welcome you back to Dromund Kaas.”

Ruth stood, leaving her mask on the couch beside her. “I am told you have news of my son.”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself after five years?” Scythia minced to a hard armchair
opposite Ruth and smiled. “I must trade news for news, my dear.”

“I was captured,” Ruth said flatly. “I’m better now.”

“And Darth Marr? Was he killed in the explosion all that time ago?”

“He died very shortly thereafter.” Then the Eternal Empire had not publicized the details of his
death. That was vaguely interesting.

“You realize what a loss that was for the Empire.”

“Acutely. I was not in a position to change his fate.”

“No, I suppose not.” Scythia’s black eyelashes fluttered. “But you’re active now. Do you desire a
reentry onto the Imperial stage? Our Empire, of course, not that other one.”

“I don’t want to return to public life.”

“Ah. Then knowledge of your whereabouts is…on the table.”

“You know it is,” Ruth said bitterly. “But that’s not the important part.”

“No. No, Officer Quinn’s son is the important part.”

“Say his name,” snarled Ruth.
“Little Rylon.” Her full lips polluted the word. “How long do you think he sat at home waiting for you? How long?”

“You know to the day. Don’t you.”

Scythia smiled indulgently. “Are you always so direct?”

Ruth patted the lightsaber the droid had not bothered to confiscate. “Usually much more so. What do you know of my son?”

“What can you give me in exchange?”

“I have credits.”

“How dull.”

“I have threats, but I’m trying not to make a scene here. I will if you press me.”

“You can’t have made it here on your own. Why not start there?”

“My. Son.”

Scythia arched her immaculate eyebrows and her gaze fell away. “Your absence of subtlety was charming in the Council chambers. It gets tiresome here.”

Just then a droid whirred in. It had a peculiar astromech’s build with a humanoid head on a platter as the top. It carried a little tray of frosting-drowned cookies. The droid stopped before Ruth first. It lowered its head-tray and waited for her to select a cookie.

“I’m not hungry, thank you.”

“Please,” said Scythia. “You’ve had nothing to eat since you landed on this planet. And I give you my word, these cookies have not been tampered with.”

“I know what your word is worth, Jora Mei.”

“Then you know, Ruth Niral, that until I have a compelling reason I will not engage in extreme measures. And drugging my houseguest before we have reached an understanding is extreme.”

Ruth gave up and surveyed the cookies. One of them seemed to have a stray dollop of frosting on one side, shaped almost like a logo she had once seen floated as possible alliance branding. She took that one, only to have it nearly come apart in her hands. Hurriedly she deposited the lump of frosting in one hand and raised the rest to her lips to eat.

Darth Scythia was admiring her cookie.

The frosting felt weird.


Ruth finally opened the hand that held the frosting. It was hardly frosting at all, just a little covering of a piece of plastoid. With a start Ruth realized it was an earpiece.

She brought it to her ear, tapped its cover, and listened.
“Hey,” came a familiar voice. “You got this on yet? Shh. It’s a one-way link.”

Theron, Ruth didn’t yell at her hidden earpiece. What are you doing?

“Listen, as long as Scythia’s negotiating, you might want to know that her personal stores include a lot of indufflin. A lot. Either she’s collecting the stuff for sentiment’s sake or she’s dependent on it - whether for Shorz’ syndrome or just for fun I don’t know. But you might want to drop that bit of trivia if she gets too high-handed.”

Theron, she didn’t yell. Get out of here. Get out get out get out.

“I’ll keep watching the door. I’ll see you in space. Or when we get back home.”

Theron! she didn’t yell. She pulled the earpiece out and stowed it in her vest. He was here. He was in danger. And he had just handed her the leverage she needed to walk out of here free.

Scythia glided back in, poised as ever in her glittering black sheath. “My dear, is your ear bothering you?”

Ruth’s mouth went dry. “I thought I heard buzzing. It’s over now.”

“So many busy little bees in this city. I don’t blame you.” She sat, smiling her neat close-lipped smile. “Now. Where were we?”

“You were making me beg for news of my son.”

“Ah. News of your son is cheap, relatively speaking. With you I could buy a dozen Empires. If you want to beg, beg me for your freedom.”

“I could break out of here.”

Scythia’s eyebrow arched. “Could you really?” she murmured. “You know I have my monster.”

“Do not test me on this.”

“Ah, but if I died, you would be no closer to little Rylon then before. No, you cannot afford to kill me.” She gestured. A beast over two meters tall stalked into the room. Pale, scarred, marred by modifications and the cruel whim of a dark nature: every Sith on Dromund Kaas knew the Shadow Killer called Khem Val. Ruth had seen him years ago and he chilled her as much now as he had then. “And even after we conclude our business,” purred Scythia, “you will not kill me.”

“Blunt threats? We must be nearing the end of negotiations.”

“If I save your son, will you surrender your location and, ah, prospects, to me?”

Who would take care of him? Theron and Lana, maybe, out of some perceived debt. Theron with a child would be just too sweet. She backed away from the thought because it was too bright for a place like this. She couldn’t imagine Wynston taking care of a child. But he would find that child parents who could love him. He was resourceful that way. It would have to be enough.

“If you retrieve him,” said Ruth, “I will go with you. First, proof.”

“Oh, you poor dear. You’ve missed five years of his growth.” Scythia stood and made a show of selecting a holocron to cradle in her jeweled fingers. Ruth started when she realized it was a small
holoterminal. With a swift gesture Scythia summoned up a picture of a little boy in a felt sparring outfit. Ruth’s heart seized. Was he older here? What was he thinking at the moment that was captured? Was he safe? Was he still standing somewhere, frozen in his suit, waiting for her? Oh, let him be waiting for her.

“He can’t be more than six,” Ruth said sharply. “This is the most recent proof you have?”

“I don’t make my colleagues’ offspring a full-time pursuit. I can tell you this: Malavai Quinn took his son to your estate and was followed by a Kaasian nurse. What is known is that the nurse left with the child while Quinn stayed behind. She proceeded to travel on a well-documented but exceedingly circuitous route into neutral space. I have full records of passenger manifests up until that final step.”

“Then? When was this?”

“Shortly after that holo was taken, four and a half years ago. I lost track of him after that.”

“Meaning someone more devious than you got to him.” Or had Quinn sent him somewhere safe? No, he could never be safe alone. “What a prime target he must have seemed like.”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to appreciate that.”

“He was a boy! He’s still a boy! He should be home with his mother!”

“But his mother,” pronounced Scythia, “was not there.” She set the holocron and its precious image on a side table and sat down again. “Regardless. I have given you what I know. It’s your turn. I can make you quite comfortable here until we sort out how best to reintroduce you to society. Or rebuild you, if that is your desire.”

“Whatever rebuilding I have to do won’t be with you, Scythia. I’m not in the habit of obeying addicts.”

Scythia’s lip twitched. “Oh? You will have to explain that.”

“I have a sample of the indufflin you keep. Do you want to tell me you’re storing it for someone else?”

Scythia didn’t bother with surprise. Her dark olive eyes kindled straight to fury. “Was that what your little bird told you? I don’t use indufflin. I don’t need indufflin. Whoever’s selling you your information is as woefully misinformed as you are.”

“Does the Dark Council need the truth? Or just a properly circulated rumor? I don’t have to destroy you to your face, Scythia. I can let everyone’s anxiety to find something to use against you do the work for me. Then it’s just a matter of the supply chain…can even you keep it open against all comers?”

Darth Scythia stood, the darkness gathering around her, nearly blotting out Ruth’s senses. “I don’t like being played, Wrath.”

“I don’t like playing, Scythia. That’s why I propose a deal. I forget I ever saw your habit. And you forget you ever saw me. When we meet again we can renegotiate terms. Is that to your liking?”

Scythia seethed. Veins were turning dark in crumbling spots at her temples. “Get out,” she said. “Get out before my Shadow Killer forgets that you’re more useful alive.”
Ruth stood, summoning her calm around her. “We have a deal. Good day.”

*

Still standing over the navicomputer, Ruth shook her holo as if doing so would connect faster. “Theron, dammit, where the hell are you!”

He showed up as sitting down. Probably in his own pilot’s chair. “Are you out of Dromund Kaas skies?” she said sharply.

“I’m clear,” he said. “You? Got what you needed?”

“You idiot! I am not discussing this with you! What we are discussing is your completely reckless endangerment!”

“What, more reckless than walking solo into Darth Scythia’s stronghold?”

“I can defend myself against Darth Scythia. You can’t!”

“She could be on our side. Remember Revan. She worked with us once before. Heck, she might again, when the time is right.”

“She knelt to Emperor Arcann. Perhaps she’s laying her own plans for overthrow but she will not trust us and we cannot trust her. And you ran blithely into her fortress!”

“Technically I ran with serious concentration into her fortress. I don’t care. You were in there.”

“And I was fine!”

“My trivia wasn’t helpful in bargaining your way out?”

“Beside the point. Jora Mei is one of the most dangerous women in the galaxy!”

“So are you.”

“You may as well have picked a fight with me!”

He leaned forward, scowling. “I’m starting to think I did!”

“Theron, you can’t do this. This was my fight. Against my enemy. For my child. You had no right.”

“Did you ever stop to think that you might not have the right to throw your life away? People need you.”

“My son needs me, Theron Shan. The rest of you can go hang.”

“Ruth—!”

She cut the line.

She couldn’t lose him, too. And if that meant keeping half a galaxy away to keep him out of her danger, she’d do it. Better Theron absent than Theron gone from a threat Ruth had brought into their lives.

Theron, in Jora Mei’s clutches. Theron’s cybernetics sizzling under a torrent of Force lightning.
Theron, caught perfectly still, her nails describing their elegant arc across his chest in the instant before the pain began. Theron, paying the price for the situation Ruth should never have gotten herself into.

Theron, with his light step and his sharp tawny eyes, alone in her dark quarters, gambling his life on the hope that she had a weakness to find. It was too much to think about now.

It was a long flight back to Odessen. Ruth wanted an alternate destination but the information she had been sent didn’t bring her that far. She pored over the schedules and passenger manifests linked to her son’s flight across the galaxy. Rylon who had been named for the reason she’d met his father, for her first evidence of what she could expect from the master she had so badly underestimated. A reminder always. Little Rylon had crisscrossed the galaxy. What was the reasoning? What was the destination? The trail even doubled back on itself in places. Someone wanted to lead a chase. Had anyone been there to provide one? Had Quinn pursued? Or had he devised the whole thing to smuggle their child someplace safe? Didn’t he realize that there was no place safe outside a parent’s physical custody? What was he thinking?

Where was Rylon, and who now played the part of his parents? The alternative…was impossible to contemplate. So under whose care did he live now?

Ruth studied until her vision was blurring too badly to continue. Then she shambled to her quarters. There was no crib in the corner. There was no partner in the too-large bed. She fell over and let dreams grumble and mutter in her head until the time came for landing.

* 

Ruth had a fast ship, but Theron had a faster one. It had come in handy during maneuvers on Dromund Kaas. Now he reached Odessen before Ruth could.

It was pouring outside. He found an overhang on the rough boardwalk out to the landing pads and listened in on traffic control until Ruth came through. Then he went to meet her. If she was furious she was furious. He was getting close to it himself.

He rounded a corner to find her stalking along, staring straight ahead, hardly seeming to notice him until she was almost upon him.

He stepped forward. “Ruth? Any luck?”

Her eyes snapped shut and open, dark in the low light. “You were there. You tell me.”

“If you think I was just going to let you walk into Darth Scythia’s den alone you don’t know me very well.”

“It wasn’t your fight, Theron.”

“No, but it was yours! And you don’t have to face that alone.”

“Fine. Yes. You helped.” She pushed wet hair back from her forehead. “Just tell me why. This wasn’t advantageous, Theron, it didn’t benefit anyone but me, and worst of all it could have gotten you killed, which neither one of us wants. Why get involved?”

He thought about lying and couldn’t. “Because it was you,” he said. “It’s been you since the day I saw you alive again.” Since the day she’d heard her speak a word to a friend in that miraculously changeable voice. Since the day he’d realized her affections ran as deep as her hatreds, having already known she nursed her hatreds for so very long.
She considered. “Slight change of subject,” she said slowly. “Do you think I’m so cold I cannot return that?”

Suddenly it was hard to look at her. He settled for staring at the rain past her shoulder. “Are you returning it for me? Theron? Or just anyone who’s been this useful?”

A muscle in her cheek twitched. “You, dammit! Is that what you wanted to hear? You. The way you make every tragic thing just a little softer or a little more survivable. The way you walk, the way I never know whether you’re joking about what your cybernetics do, the way your hair frays in a fight and the way you’re annoyed when you realize it. The way you’re always saying you’re not good at relationships or people, but in the end you are surrounded by people who would fight and die for you because you’re a man worth following. Your eyes, your mouth, your stupid perfect chin. You, stars, Theron, let me in. If you ever wanted me, let me in.”

Something wound too tight inside now loosened enough for him to breathe. He pulled her into his arms, letting the rain pelt them both. Her eyes were wide and her lips very nearly trembling. Or was that a trick of the light? He covered her mouth with his own, seeking the only warmth in reach and finding it hot. He pulled her in and she was as lithe in his arms as he had imagined, as he had thought of his hands on her and her arms twined around his neck.

She broke away and distanced by touching her forehead to his. “I can’t lose you, too. And I can’t let you walk into danger on my account.”

Danger? That was the dominating factor in their lives. He couldn’t change it if he wanted to. “This is who I am. If that’s a problem for you, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

The rain streamed down her face for a long moment’s indecision. “Just tell me next time?”

He pulled her tighter. She touched her teeth to his lip, ever so slightly, and slid back into a long-running kiss. This was happening, it was real, finally, and the fit of her mouth was something he had never adequately imagined. Blind impulse pushed him, and her before him, to the railing while his hands ran to her waist and held her firmly. She made a little noise against his lips and suddenly her legs were working apart with him between them. He steadied one hand on her thigh and tested her mouth with his tongue and ran the other hand up to her side, brushing her small firm breast with one slow thumb. The rain pulled its curtain around them, hard and unremitting.

Lana’s voice flopped soggily between them. “There you are. There’s been an emergency, we should…” Theron tore himself away from Ruth’s electrifying mouth and turned his head to look.

Lana seemed to realize just what she had seen. “Am I interrupting?” she said, her voice cracking.

Ruth laughed, a deep thrilling sound. He would have to get more of it someday.

“Nothing-” Theron coughed. Ruth hadn’t withdrawn an inch of contact other than their mouths and the slow ongoing withdrawal of her breast from his stilled palm. “Nothing that can’t wait. What’s the crisis of the day?”

“Yes,” Ruth said throatily, not looking at either of them. “What pillar of civilization are we saving now?”
“All right,” said Theron Shan. “We’re only sending one fighter out, any more would just be cluttering the playing field.” This was the task they had been torn away for. Ruth prayed it was fast. She had business with him to get back to. “I’ll be piloting. I’ll need a gunner.”

“Me,” said Ruth.

Theron did a double take. “Really?”

“What? I’ve handled guns before. Maybe not on a vessel this size, but I expect the principles remain the same. I think a Force user with a little experience can handle it.”

He grinned. “I will not argue. Come on.”

Flight suits were ready and waiting for both of them. This Republic ship was a small fast mover, carrying four smaller and faster-moving fighters. Theron jumped into the pilot’s pod; above and behind him, Ruth turned in the blaster turret.

“Settling in all right?” Theron’s voice sounded loud inside Ruth’s helmet.

“Nice and smooth,” she said. “Ready to take this thing out?”

“Looking forward to it.”

The target? A probe of Eternal Empire make. It was small, maneuverable – but far from any mother ship. By intercepting it out here at the very borders of the Odessen system they made it look simply like an accident had befallen. They just had to take it out fast enough.

The ship clanked and released from its hangar clamp. Ruth sucked in a breath at that short sudden feeling of falling.

“I’ve got you,” said Theron. Of course he was too close to miss any of her reactions. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The pit of Ruth’s stomach tightened and stayed taut as the fighter accelerated to chase speed. Theron took it on what felt like a lazy arc of a trajectory. Ruth slid her hands over the controls and prepared for the first chance at blaster fire.

“In range?” she said, more for the conversation than because she was having any trouble with the readouts in front of her.

“Almost there. Just tell me you’ll be warmed up.”

“And ready to go, mister.” She squeezed a burst of fire into the void. The probe was sailing along
at a steady and rapid rate. Theron swept in alongside as though he’d been doing this for years. Just never yet with her.

“Any time you’re ready, madam.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” She adjusted the angle of her turret and let off a burst of scathing red fire.

The probe spun and evaded.

“Playing hard to get?” said Theron.

“That won’t save it.” Ruth adjusted and fired again. Theron twisted gracefully alongside, drawing her irresistibly with him. With the best of her intuition and experience she fired again along the direction he led. This time it hit. She thrilled to the impact.

The probe flew on regardless.

“Care to try that again?” drawled Theron.

“Just keep me going.” She noticed something blinking on her display: an energy buildup. “Oh, stars. Did you see that?”

“Affirmative. It may blow when it blows,” said Theron.

Ruth fired and hit again. “I’m not sure it’s going to matter,” she said. “Not if we can’t hit it hard enough.”

There was a pause.

“Do you trust me?” said Theron. He made it strangely personal.

Ruth bit her lip in spite of herself. “Yes,” she said softly.

“Charge up your blasters. Steady as you can. I’m going in. Just tell me when to turn.” He leveled their course, direct for the probe.

Ruth gripped the controls, allowing all available power to pulse into readiness. She found herself leaning forward, staring with full intent at their target. They gained slowly. She kept her hands steady while the tension crept upward and inward…and upward, and inward.

“Almost there,” urged Theron.

“It’s in my sights,” said Ruth.

“Almost there. Just say when.”

She smiled slyly. “You’ll know.”

“In range,” he said. “At your leisure.”

Weary of straining for release, she let loose. “Now!”

The blaster fire was a hard full shock of crimson, flaring out of her view even as Theron swerved up at the controls and forced her up and away. She felt rather than saw the explosion as its shock rippled through their shared vehicle. For a moment it was all she could do to breathe and let herself
“How are we?” it finally occurred to her to say.

“I’ve got you.” He sounded satisfied.

“Ah. One probe down,” she said. “Not sure I could manage another right away.”

“Beautiful shot,” said Theron.

“Should’ve gotten it the first time.”

“We got you there in the end. I won’t complain if you don’t.”

“Take me home?”

Theron made a small satisfied sound. “You got it.”

She sat back and trembled, letting Theron do the work of bringing them home. Back on the little carrier Lana and the others swarmed around to help them out of their seats and flight suits. They had, it seemed, heard every word.

Eye contact with Theron shocked her into silence. His pupils were vast, his whole body tense. And there was no privacy on this vessel. The presence of the others was an agony all the way back to Odessen. Oddly, nobody made small talk the entire time.

*

Theron followed Ruth at a racing walk out of the shuttle. Wynston and Lana stayed put, looking nervously in a number of unrelated directions.

“So,” said Lana.

“Well,” said Wynston.

Lana took in a sharp breath and let out a burst of words. “If she hurts him, so help me—”

“She? Hurt him? Never without provocation. He’s the dangerous one.”

“Wynston, I’ve seen the dossier. Every man that woman has ever slept with is either dead or missing.”

“Except me,” Wynston said indignantly.

“Oh. So that’s confirmed. Regardless, intentionally or not, Ruth may be a danger to others.”

“Theron’s a lifelong spy. I’m not sure he knows how to do anything other than play with her heart, and if he plays with her heart there will be consequences.”

“Theron isn’t the lying sort. He’s too genuine for that.”

“He’s a secret agent.”

“And she’s a Sith. Who do you really think is more dangerous?”

The secret agent glared at the Sith. The Sith glared at the secret agent.
“Who do you think has more warmth of heart to give?” said Wynston. “If she falls in love there’s no going back.”

“If he falls in love and anything happens…we might lose him, Wynston.”

“She knows how to share with a good cause. It’s burned her before and she’ll still do it because she’s too good to do otherwise.”

“She had better be.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

They stood and ducked out of the shuttle.

“Bloody hell,” said Wynston in the glaring daylight. “I just want this to work out.”

“I think there’s a chance,” said Lana.

He took his time thinking as they walked. Finally, looking sidelong at his companion, he said “I’m not a great believer in true love, Lana.”

“Fortunately for us all,” said Lana, with a returning look and a wry half smile, “things can exist without your believing in them.”

Wynston frowned at the world in general. “Don’t think I’m not aware that I’m relying on that.”

*

They made it through the door, barely.

Ruth seized Theron’s shoulders and pulled only to find him doing the same to her hips. She kissed him, hard, not doing a great job of lining up chins and teeth but working now in continuous motion to hone the contact. She let him tug her jacket down over her shoulders and shook it off her arms. He finally just set his hands, thumbs under jaw, fingers spread across the sides of her skull, and pressed his tongue into her mouth, hot and terrifically difficult to think through. She backed him to some furniture followed by the wall and flattened him there, working now at his shirt’s hem while he hooked his fingers into the front of her pants.

It was all going well when he slid his hands around her waist and started lifting her shirt. She whimpered in spite of herself and jerked back.

“Whoa, what?” he said quietly. His eyes looked big from this distance.

She spread two hands over her belly. “Not here,” she whispered.

She didn’t like the way he studied her then. As if he was trying to decide whether to get offended. She bit her lip and concentrated on the outline of his chest until he nodded. “Okay,” he whispered, and kissed her again, slowly, running his hands up her back outside her shirt.

From there on in it was all acceleration.

*

Theron fell into bed. It was a satisfying impact of a terribly, terribly good-looking partner.
He lay on his back and stared, first at the ceiling, then at the wreckage of the room, then, more casually, at Ruth. “I don’t usually do this on the first date.”

“Second thoughts?”

“Not on your life.” He reached for her hand and drew her over to rest on his chest. “How’re you doing?”

Ruth considered. The past time, however much time that had been, had been perfect focus on sensation to the exclusion of anything else. Now the world was crowding in around her and she didn’t like the look of it.

“I don’t usually do this on the first date,” she said, and laughed.

Laughter thrummed in his chest. “Fair enough.”

She held still. Now that the blunt exchange was done she knew she was running out of interestingness. She was not anyone’s idea of beautiful, or else surely she’d have heard it from someone sincere by now. And no one would accuse her of being charming. What she was was passionate, and as she caught her breath she wondered just how far that would get her.

Theron’s hand trailed up her clothed side. She felt her flesh quivering against scars all the way and hoped that that would cover the very genuine tension creeping alongside.

“Babe,” said Theron. “You know there’s nothing you’ve been through that would make me care about you less. Right?”

“Great. You’re being understanding.”

“I’m serious. If you want, that shirt stays on ‘til it disintegrates and then you get a new one and I’ll turn my back while you change. I just don’t want you to feel like you have to hide from me.”

She had to shut him up. She propped her chin on his chest and smiled. “Not on the first date. That’s all.”

“Okay.” He levered up and kissed her. “That’s about all the relationship savvy I’ve got,” he said with a nervous grin. “I guess we…I mean…you’re welcome to stay, of course.”

“Theron, there’s no place I’d rather be.”

And that grin was no longer covering for anything but happiness. He relaxed back to the pillow. “You know what I love about you? Anything you say, you mean it.”

“You know what I love about you?”

“My lying about my cybernetics, if I recall correctly.”

She laughed. “I’ll let you know the rest as we go.” She caught herself. Was that assuming too much? “Will we do this again?”

“Early,” he said, wrapping his arms around her, “and often.”

They lay for a while in companionable silence. Ruth wasn’t quite sure which blink turned into sleep, but when she woke she was at the edge of the bed, nicely wrapped up, and Theron was moving to hug her again.
He nuzzled just below her ear. “You hog the covers, you know.”

“I’m sorry,” she said drowsily. “You can have.”

“Shh, I’d hate to de-cocoon you now.” He slid his hand through her hair and down her neck, shoulder, side. “I can’t wait to see what else I’ve been missing.”

“What, like your sheets?”

“Everything, babe. Sleep tight.”

*End of Book 1: Waking*

*****
Chapter Summary


6 ATC

5 years before the confirmation of the Wrath

14.5 years before the release of the Outlander

“I saw you on Korriban, you know.”

Lana looked up from her station. The man in the door was tall, Pureblood, in armor that suggested he expected to get his hands dirty. Her brand-new role as aide to Lord Ferrido was supposed to be quieter than that.

She wasn’t afraid of field work. She was just better at optimizing other people’s fieldwork.

“Oh?” she said politely to the total stranger.

“Lana Beniko. Advisor to playground kings. I think we all know what would’ve happened to Acolyte Reubel without you.”

He would have died popular and young, she thought. He might still manage both, but they had graduated months ago; it was out of her hands now. “I was honored to count Reubel among my friends on Korriban. What of it?”

“People who know you get places. I think I’d like to know you. Dinner. Public, of course; the Black Command, if you wish.”

Lana boggled. The Black Command was the most exclusive restaurant in Kaas City. “Isn’t that a bit much?”

“There’s more to life than efficiency. I make a flashy gesture. You decide whether you like it. Does that meet with your approval?”

Lana studied him. He had made it out of Korriban with at least a partial map of influence. And Lord Ferrido might not always be the most advantageous ally.

There were supposed to be other considerations in situations like this, but Lana wasn’t stupid. You followed lines of power. And, after all, she might get to like someone if she could work with him. Just because she hadn’t met that someone yet…

“In a few days,” she said. “I need to find a dress.” After all, any interview might be a useful interview.
April, 10 ATC – 15 months before the confirmation of the Wrath

10.5 years before the release of the Outlander

_Alderaan_

“Vette,” snapped Quinn over the holo. “Find a change of clothes for my lord and get them to House Thul. Now.”

“Hey, had a great day talking up the servants, got some solid intel on where to find that Jaesa person we’re all here for. How’s your day been?”

“Do it,” seethed Quinn, and the holo snapped off.

Vette sighed philosophically and went to dig through Ruth’s stuff. The Sith didn’t really use her dresser, she just had some kind of geometrical system piled on the floor. Vette assumed there were deep Sith reasons for this, that or she’d been raised in a barn.

They had gotten separated because Ruth wanted to help out that Darnek guy she’d slept with back in the day. (Wynston, she would learn later. The man had a lot of names.) With the whole Quinn thing Ruth was no longer into that relationship, but apparently Darnek and Ruth could still be mutual field support. Ah, Imperial bonding. Ruth was a pretty bad Imperial, and Vette had her doubts about the affable Chiss’s Imperial qualifications, but still.

The ride from the spaceport to House Thul proper wasn’t long. A guard had only to hear “the Sith” and led her down a hallway.

And downstairs, and down another hallway.

And downstairs, and…

“…did she get lost?” Vette said brassily. “Or did you?”

“The infirmary.” Vette watched him look for the collar on her neck. It wasn’t there. He still opted to skip any honorific. “Here you are.”

Vette clutched her package and walked in.

It was a surprisingly big room for one kolto tank and a few chairs. Vette sagged briefly in the doorway. Ruth was floating in the kolto, her ungelled hair drawing crazed arcs almost to her chin. Her entire abdomen was wrapped up in some kind of white latticework.

“Is she okay?” Vette said, wishing she sounded stronger.

“Just when I get rid of the agent…” Quinn hadn’t moved a muscle from his standing study of a the kolto tank, not well concealed by holding a datapad up in between. “She will recover.”

“What happened?”

“The agent’s plan went awry. His Killik allies turned against us. Their last representative did this.” He indicated their wounded leader with one hand. “She should never have been forced to clean up his mess.”
“She offered to help. Because they’re friends.”
“Yes, very good friends.”

Quinn’s attention was firmly on the floating body. “Are you pissed off that she had a boyfriend or that she almost died? Because one of those things is worth getting worked up over.”

“I have no opinion on her romantic decisions. I have strong opinions on where and when she should be risking her life.”

“This could’ve happened on anybody’s watch.”

Quinn bared his teeth. “It never happened on mine.”

“You know she’s not planning on getting back together with him, right?”

“What?”

“Darnek. Ruth. Not an item.” Because of Quinn. Someday he might even notice that. A shame, really; Darnek made Ruth laugh and treated Vette like a person, which put him two up vs. the officer now standing in front of her.

Quinn’s mouth opened for a second before he succeeded in making noise. “Then it was doubly foolish of him to let her get hurt.”

Damn it. A quiet shove would make Ruth happy but it would also make Quinn happy. In the stillness of the medical room it looked obvious: he loved her. In some stupid, twisted, Imperial way, he loved her, and Ruth had already demonstrated a lot of patience for stupid Imperial things.

Drat.

Vette put on a brave face. “So what does a girl have to do around here to be considered useful?”

His familiar sneer curled back. “Stop flattering yourself.”

Vette grabbed a seat. “Why don’t I sit down here and talk every time you shoot me a dirty look.”

Quinn turned tormented eyes back toward their sole point of commonality. “I dispatched the thing that did this to her.”

“Yeah? Good job. She’ll get you a shiny commendation when she gets out.”

He kept staring. He didn’t voice it, but she could read lips well enough to catch the “I don’t care.”

* 

June, 11 ATC – 1 month before the confirmation of the Wrath

9 Years before the release of the Outlander

*Hutta*

In the melee Wynston wrenched a bulky blaster rifle from one of the anarchist thugs. When the last anarchist went down, he turned his weapon on the woman who had brought him here.
Kaliyo Djannis grinned at him from where she stood on the other side of her fallen contact Wheezer and his dead friends. "Finally got yourself a real firearm, huh?"

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

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

Wynston didn't.

She frowned at him. "What?"

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

"Well, yeah."

Again he had to ask himself, what had made Intelligence insist on hiring her? He had never figured it out. What justified letting her using his agency – sometimes going over his head to do so – for the destruction she did? Stay calm, he reminded himself. Cool. Professional. "How long?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Huh." She nodded, her eyes flicking between his rifle and his face. "You really mean it, don't you. You're just gonna cut me loose."
"Yes. Settle your accounts with Intelligence on your own time." Let them sort out her purpose. Or let them admit she had played them all. "Don't come after me. I promise I'll leave you be so long as you walk away now."

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

"I'm aware."

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

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

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

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

"Come off it," she spat. "Like you haven't been paid to do worse yourself. You're as dirty as I am." She rolled her eyes in exaggerated disgust. "So fine. Let's call it even, we go back to the ship, you can still save the Empire – it's not like my side deals were gonna bring the whole thing crashing down, and I'll stop doing it anyway. Just skip the nerf shit about punishing me over your stupid schoolboy principles."

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

"You haven't shot me yet. You're not going to. I don't think you can do it, agent." She even managed a dark smile. "Those big professional balls aren't up to it this time, are they?"

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

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

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

"Go," he said.

"No," she replied, and started her play. She let the rifle fall to hang by its shoulder strap as she
approached him with a lazy sway-hipped gait. "Look, Wyn, I know you're mad. I was a bad girl. But I'll make it up to you, promise. This ride is too good for you to give up now and we both know it. Plus, I will make the very short remainder of your life hell if you leave me on this rock. So let's just go, yeah?" She edged in to touch him.

He let his rifle drop. Kaliyo's rages could pass as quickly as they came. She knew he knew that. This close she smelled of plasma, sweat, scorched armor, with the sharp edge of blood. Around anyone else that meant unpleasant cleanup; around her it meant foreplay. He settled one hand against the perfect warm curve of her waist.

"I can be good," she purred. Wynston took every millisecond he could, but he couldn't take many. He leaned into her, swept a dart out of his pocket, and planted it in her side. It was the only trick he had that wouldn't kill her. He knew she carried no corresponding mercy.

Her eyes widened. "That was my move."

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

She bared her teeth again. "You're an idiot."

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

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

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

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

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

* 

September, 11 ATC – 2 months after the confirmation of the Wrath
9 years before the release of the Outlander

Dromund Kaas

Ruth looked around the Citadel conference room. It was an adequate place to conduct cleanup business before her work as Wrath took her back out on the move.

Just some cleanup business.
Right on time, somebody opened the door and escorted Malavai Quinn in. Ruth didn’t even process who the somebody was; she only knew that the door closed and left her alone with her ex-husband. He was uncollared now. Between the two of them they knew where ownership lay. She could afford him the dignity of leaving the shock collar behind.

They faced each other in silence across the length of the conference table. When she was sure she could keep her breath steady, she started.

“You master is dead, and I am sick of revenge.” Her thoughts shattered at the look on his face. She fixed her eyes on the wall and found herself still talking. “It’s meaningless to talk of forgiveness between us. Nevertheless I must free you. The war effort needs you alive, Quinn. The Empire needs you. The enemy is out there and I will not destroy a man so well qualified to fight it. So you shall live. I’ve unfrozen your accounts. I shall write a recommendation for any post you desire. When the time comes – when the time comes, you can see the child. Under supervision, of course.” The terms were too generous. They hurt less than the alternatives. Even now she couldn’t deny him that.

He was calm. Steady. “Will you be resuming your campaign against the Republic, my lord?”

“Yes.”

“And if I asked to serve you? Knowing how well we work together. Knowing what a difference you and I could make. Knowing I would submit to your command without reservation.”

“If you asked, I would spit in your eye.” He flinched. “Any other stupid questions?”

“No, my lord.”

“Good. Coordinate with Jaesa for your passage offworld.”

She jerked her chin toward the door and he obeyed, heading to the doorway. “One final thing,” she said. He stood still. “I love you.” He shut his eyes, a gesture almost enough to break her will, but he held steady. And so did she. “I’ll go to my grave loving you. And for that above all, I will never forgive you.” An ugly truth, and something she didn’t care to carry alone. “Dismissed.”

*  

February, 14 ATC – 2.5 years after the confirmation of the Wrath
6 years before the release of the Outlander

“I can take him,” said Ruth.

“It’s fine,” said Wynston. “I left my sidearm in the coat closet this time.”

“How trusting.”

Wynston looked at Ruth Niral. She was pale and unsmiling. Her hair was slicked back to her nape, her black clothing as drab as if she were on the job as Emperor’s Wrath. That job had eaten her entire. Wynston was one of the rapidly dwindling population that got close enough to notice.

Young Rylon Niral, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, black-haired, burbled in Wynston’s lap at the dinner table. Wynston guided him more or less upright and started jogging him on one knee.

“How have you been?” he said. “From all I hear the campaigns have been going brilliantly.”
“Yes.” She looked away.

“But you’re not pleased with them.”

She bit her lip. That little upturn that had always characterized her small full mouth at rest was gone. “Jaesa left. There were…complications.”

Jaesa had been Ruth’s shot of sanity ever since the betrayal, nearly three long years ago. Even Vette had left the rampaging Wrath while Jaesa held on. “What do you mean, left? Is she off planet?”

“I mean she’s gone, Wynston. We fought. She still thinks she can start this school for Light Side Sith, still thinks they’ll turn out something other than raw chum for the true Sith – I can’t get into this. Even if I could condone her stupid naïve plan I…I wouldn’t know.”

Wynston kept bobbing Rylon. “Know what?”

“I have to concentrate to say this,” she said mysteriously. “I…when the Hand calls me to my master, when I visit his station. He can see into my memories. I trust that you’re doing what you do for the Empire. And I understand that that’s not always congruent with obeying every Sith you meet. And knowing all that, I have to tell you, don’t tell me things I can’t know.”

She sounded…resigned. It wasn’t a good look for her. “Won’t you be in trouble for telling me this?”

Ruth slouched in her chair. “He thinks it’s funny,” she said hollowly. “At least, that’s what it felt like after I warned Jaesa.”

Rylon had decided to try to climb Wynston’s shoulders. Wynston kept his hands ready to catch if necessary. A new plan sprang to mind, one that would make her safe and take the scourge of the Wrath away from the galaxy. “Ruth, come away with me.”

Her lip curled, hard. “Are you out of your mind? I’m a servant of the Emperor. You don’t get to walk away from that.”

“I have resources. We can make this work. You don’t have to live with that in your head.” Once he had hoped the Wrath could moderate the currents of power. But that abundantly hadn’t happened. Plan B was to evacuate a woman who had never asked to be this hard.

“I’m touched. But I am the Emperor’s Wrath. It has its dark moments but it’s the only thing that hasn’t ripped itself out from under me on no provocation, so if it’s all the same to you I’ll stick with it.”

“It’s not all the same to me.”

She scowled. “Figure of speech, Wynston. I forgot to ask, how have you been?”

“Anonymous. Free. Doing good. Please. My friend is miserable, I hate to see her like that.”

“Your friend is what she has to be.” She looked him over and folded her hands on the table. “I am the Wrath. And you won’t like the methods that I have found effective.”

“So leave them behind, too.”

“For a clever, handsome, principled, supportive, brave, idealistic man with a cause.” She stared
through him and he realized that she meant every word. “How neatly that lines up,” she said thickly. “Not this time, Wynston. Are you hungry?”

Rylon hollered general displeasure. The conversation stayed completely superficial after that. When they parted ways Wynston honestly wasn’t sure whether she would invite him back again.

*

December, 14 ATC

6 years before the release of the Outlander

*Coruscant*

“No,” said Larr Gith, hero of Tython and superstar of the Jedi Order.

This did not compute. T7-01 would not let it compute.

<T7 = Jedi’s best friend // T7 + Jedi = unstoppable // T7 + Jedi = saved galaxy from Revanites>

“Yeah, and they sure appreciated that,” said Larr Gith. “I want to leave. No more Jedi prize pony. No more holding the line while a Dark Council floozy tries to trick me into taking on the Emperor by myself, and definitely no more Jedi critiquing how I did. I don’t want their campaigns, I don’t want their orders. I didn’t want their stupid Council seat anyway, I was just asking them to prove a point. Teeseven, you want to be a hero the way they say. Go find a Jedi who can be that hero for you.”

<Jedi Larr Gith = T7’s best friend>

“You’re going to be bored, not to say badly disappointed. I’m going to relax, Teeseven. I’m going to party. I’m going to drink and embarrass myself in a crowd of gushing admirers for no good reason. You should stay here.”

<T7 = go with Jedi Larr Gith>

Larr Gith sighed. “Don’t make me do this, little buddy. Just stay. Take notes so when I have to come back and save all your asses, which, by the way, will happen, I’ll have the most up to date local information.”

<T7 + Jedi = get information together>

“Buddy…no. Okay? No. Stay with the Jedi. I…I’ll come back, probably, after Satele has finished suffocating in her own ass. Wait for me.”

Teeseven spun in place. <Jedi = come home?>

“Promise, little buddy. Just after I’ve gotten some air. You look after Teb. Poor guy’s on the Council now, he needs somebody at his back.”

Teeseven reluctantly slowed. <Tebbith = nice // Jedi = stay safe>

“Anything is safer than working with those maniacs.” Larr Gith seemed to cheer up a little, and stopped turning over the something in her pocket that had at least a 68% match with the shape of a restraining bolt. “See you on the flip side.”
6 years before the release of the Outlander

Wild Space

Senya was no longer in her children’s life. They didn’t even want her there. They coveted Valkorion’s abuse more than they did her love.

And she had loved him, too. Such things, it seemed, were rarely returned. In the clarity of hindsight she saw that in some way she had been an experiment, and one that no longer interested the Emperor now that he had new subjects.

She stopped herself singing the song of revenge when she realized she was doing it. She had a traitor to hunt, a task that had her stalking the outer edges of the Eternal Empire. She had work to do. Wasn’t that what kept everyone sane? With no one to protect, she could focus all her energies on ruin. Some days she even thought that was enough to go on.

Given the chance? She would take them away. In a heartbeat. Go someplace safe, keep them protected. Teach them the old songs and the newest fighting techniques. Princes and a princess, under the protection of someone who still remembered how to sing. Somehow it had all turned wrong. But someday they would need her.

And she would be there.
As a Show of Good Faith

Chapter Summary

A Jedi comes to Odessen with a request to rescue one of his colleagues from a Hutt prison. (Lana, Ruth, Tebbith, Wynston, Theron, Jedi)

Book 2. Summons

The building of Odessen got under way months ago. It marks a lull in the war, but not an end. And people continue to pass through...

Lana got the call from traffic control before the strange ship landed. She gestured for Ruth to join her. Whoever it was trying to touch down Odessen, they would have a bad time if they meant to physically force anything.

Lana’s cape snapped behind her as she walked, a mild annoyance and one she tolerated for the look. She kept pace with Ruth as they headed for the landing pad.

The ship was a Republic model of some sort, nothing special. Lana saw no signs of life in the viewports. But the ramp descended. A tall man in brown robes stepped out. Zabrak, dark brown skin and eyes, pale horns, sculpted features. Muscular shoulders, lightsaber at his side, bulky things around his belt...threat profile high. Lana kept her head up and her eyes open. Ruth played the perfect shoulder-to-shoulder guard. If he wanted to force the issue, any issue, he would have two immediate problems, and to be frank, they were two of the bigger possible problems in this galaxy.

The man stopped, joined his hands, and bowed. “Hail,” he said in a rich baritone. “Have I come to the Alliance?”

“You already know that,” Lana said coolly. “What is your name, stranger?”

“I am Tebbith,” he said.

Prior briefings crowded to the fore. Here, the most reclusive member of...“Barsen’thor of the Jedi Council?” said Lana.

He inclined his head. “The same.”

“Do they know you’re here?” Ruth said shortly.

“No. I...may have concealed my itinerary.” He looked guilty about it. He must be a good Jedi.

“Why?” said Ruth.

“I had a vision,” said Tebbith. “This is where I need to be.”
“Sana-Rae may have seen this,” Ruth said, and pulled out her holo. The Voss answered almost instantly. Lana declined to speculate on just where on that skinny figure she hid a holo.

Sana-Rae nodded by way of greeting. “How can I serve, Outlander?”

“You said once that a Jedi master could come to Odessen. Would you know his face?”

“I believe so.”

Ruth beckoned Tebbith in. Lana edged around to where she would have a clear shot at his back. Sana-Rae’s holo figure leaned forward.

“I saw him in my visions,” said the Voss. “At last. I look forward to meeting him.” She cut out.

“Well,” said Lana. There was considerable background checking to do, but he had already made it as far as landing, so putting him into isolation seemed like a waste. “Come with me.”

Ruth tagged along at his shoulder, slightly behind him. Lana knew full well that she had one hand on a lightsaber. The Alliance was supposed to accept Jedi. It was supposed to be open to all who sought freedom from the Eternal Empire’s reach. But practice was harder than theory. The Sith had dominated the Alliance since the beginning.

“Do you get these visions often?” said Ruth.

“On the contrary,” said Tebbith, “they’re very rare. This one felt especially urgent, though.”

“I had a vision about my path once. I had to go through some social dominance ritual with an endangered animal, after which it voluntarily wept blood that I had to smear on myself to pass through the forbidden desert to my apparition. And then this other time…”

Lana looked at her. Tebbith, twisting, looked at her.

Ruth scowled at Lana. “Oh, like you’ve never done a blood ritual for a glimpse of the future.”

“I never have,” Lana said coolly.

Ruth threw up her hands. “Sure, make me look like the bad guy.”

* *

Tebbith was a simple man. He believed in a few things: the Jedi Code, the capacity of all sentient life for selflessness under the right circumstances. He believed that the Force guided and shielded him, and he trained rigorously to make that true.

“Friends,” he said, in their cavernous control center. He had been in the sanctum of Odessen for less than forty-eight hours, and he wanted to be around to help more but this mission wouldn’t wait forever. “My sources just confirmed. I come to you with a request.”

“Jedi business?” said the slender brunette called Ruth. She imbued the word with considerable sarcasm.

“Our resources are not infinite,” said the crawling dark called Lana.

“Let’s hear him out,” said the determinedly approachable cyborg called Theron.

“Hear, hear,” said the thus-far reserved Human Koth. He drew Tebbith’s eye for no reason he
could understand.

The wary Chiss called Wynston kept his own counsel.

“There is someone I believe could be a great ally. A friend of mine and of the Jedi Council’s. She has been captured and kept as a…pet…by a Hutt. I believe that if we rescue her, she can help us.”

“A Jedi,” said Ruth, “or a lover?”

Tebbith flushed. “A friend. As I intend to be.”

“As a show of good faith,” Lana said cautiously. She was dark, but she was open. And she clearly had vast influence in this sphere. Tebbith wasn’t sure what to make of her.

The Chiss crossed his arms over his chest. “Does this ally have a name?”

“Ono Tennin.” Nobody immediately noticed a problem with that claim. “I promise she doesn’t deserve the fate that’s been foisted on her.”


“I don’t know how much longer she’ll survive,” said Tebbith. “And I swear to you that she’s better for us free than imprisoned.”

“We do need to develop our Jedi contacts,” Lana said slowly.

“You’ll have my service thereafter,” said the Jedi.

“Let me make the arrangements,” said Theron.

[Theron]

“First point,” said Theron. “Who here speaks Huttese?”

Lana raised her hand. So did Wynston.

“And I can get by as long as we need to say ‘How do you get to the library?’ and any possible conjugation of ‘I walk,’” concluded Theron. There hadn’t been enough time in one lifetime to train every imaginable useful skill. “Great. Master Tebbith, which Hutt are we talking?”

“Hoboru,” said Tebbith.

“What are the odds of walking up and asking?” Wynston said darkly.

“We tried,” said Tebbith. “Unless you have some leverage as an Alliance that I didn’t have as the representative of the Jedi Council…”

“Sneaking it is,” said Wynston. “I don’t want to risk our Force users if we can avoid a fight entirely.”

“We don’t need the protection,” Lana said quietly. Wynston just gave her a look. Those two got more entangled every day. Theron wondered whether they realized it. “What are the odds we’re going to need to defend ourselves against your friend?”

“She’ll come with us,” said Tebbith. “I know she will.”
Hoboru’s compound was on a distant world, privately owned. Given the risk of a showdown with the Cartel it was a full party: Senya, Ruth, Tebbith, Theron, Wynston. They gathered on the shuttle. Tebbith stood tall and waited attentively.

“Thanks to Master Tebbith,” said Theron, “we have the compound plans on file. We have a side entrance, heavily guarded but out of earshot from the rest of the compound. Ruth, Senya, you’re ready for quick silences?”

“Certainly,” said Senya. Ruth nodded.

As they always were ready. It was nice to have a mission everyone could agree on…even if the common element was nothing more than curiosity. “Down side: We don’t know where she’s being kept. I’m counting on you guys, Master Tebbith especially, to figure that out as we go.”

“They can’t keep her on display, she’s too strong,” said Tebbith. “My guess is their underground holding cells.”

They landed masquerading as a cargo vessel, and Senya stayed with the ship while customs went through the crates they had piled in the back of the shuttle. The rest of the party rented speeders and made their way to the outside of Horobu the Hutt’s complex.

They stopped around a corner. “All right,” said Theron, beckoning them to the edge. “See those turrets? That’s our starting point. Tebbith, can you, uh, jump?”

“We’re going to kill those people, aren’t we,” Tebbith said unhappily.

“We’re not equipped to nonviolently take down every guard between here and your friend,” said Wynston. “If she’s worth killing for, you’ll go with Ruth. And if she’s not, we go home. Including you.”

“I understand,” said Tebbith, dark eyes fixed. “I can jump.”

“We’ll cover you.”

The first objective was taken without so much as a yell. Ruth was wielding her habitual two red sabers and Tebbith had a blue dual-blade that he wielded to devastating effect. He might not have a taste for killing but he certainly had the competence.

Ruth hopped down to the far side of the fence. Theron waited, tense, wondering what other guards she would find. But the gate slid open. Ruth beckoned, with Tebbith at her shoulder.

Theron drew his blaster and ran in.

[Tebbith]

Droids. Tebbith was relieved. As they crept down avenues and between buildings, the patrollers were droids. Ruth stayed in their midst, strange and self-contained and elegant in her motions. The Force-blinds kept up scathing fire in all the spaces that the Force users weren’t. He had clearly stumbled into an efficient team. It eased his fears as they proceeded further into the complex. It worried him, too, but he had committed, so he continued.

They spotted a trio and scattered to either side of the road, hiding behind plantings. Tebbith examined. Each opponent had more than one blaster available. Tebbith’s mouth tightened. He wasn’t a master of combat. He was only what he had to be.
Ruth was staring at him from across the way. She nodded. He nodded. She held up three fingers, two, one, and Tebbith launched himself at the nearest droid. He had to hope the Force-blinds could cover the middle droid.

He whirled, struck, counter-struck. And then, lifting one hand from its grip, he pushed a different kind of Force effort at his opponent.

The droid squeaked and slowed, every movement suddenly underwater. Loose tape on its limbs fluttered with its momentum as it always had, but its every pneumatic movement slowed.

He stepped in and tapped, blaster one, two, three, four. “There,” he said, and deactivated his saber.

Ruth was staring. Wynston, walking into the open, was staring. Theron was staring.

“What did you do?” said Wynston.

“It’s a little exercise I learned,” he said. “A temporary slowing in the Force. I don’t have the strength to beat things into submission with lightsabers. I have to find other ways to prevail.”

Wynston nodded, radiating approval. “More power to you.” Tebbith smiled uncertainly. The Chiss moved on.

The house over the dungeons was well into the complex. Theron and Wynston stopped the party repeatedly to shoot out cameras. Someone knew there was a problem. If they moved quickly that wouldn’t matter.

Wynston, for some reason, was swaggering. He squinted into the middle distance and smiled. It took years from his fine-featured face. “Do you remember infiltrating the Dark Temple, all those years ago?”

Ruth grinned. “You weren’t afraid of anything.”

“Well, I had a Sith I could fool into helping me.”

The Sith gestured around her. “How much things have changed.”

“I don’t know, I’d still go to great lengths for a very unusual Sith.”

“Does this really remind you? I mean, no one here is going crazy and dying.”

“Yes, but I’m being sent into the nexu’s den for reasons I don’t know yet. It’s very much like old times.”

“Please,” Tebbith said nervously. “She’ll be a friend to all of you.”

There were human guards at the door to the high tower they needed. Wynston and Theron once again picked off cameras. “I’ll continue a bit,” said Theron. “Let them think this wasn’t our target.”

He couched his blaster in his elbow and loped on. Ruth watched him with something like dread in her eyes.

“This way,” said Wynston, and they followed.

Ruth took the lead in the hallway. She deflected blaster shots and dispatched turrets and guards with cool briskness. Tebbith sent forth his Force concentration where he could to hamper the enemy and bolster the friend. His heart was pounding. The Jedi Temple had never prepared him for this. And even his nerve-wracking time as ambassador hadn’t felt this…intense.
“Left,” said Wynston, and Ruth took the next left into a narrow spiral staircase.

“Be careful,” said Tebbith.

Ruth laughed softly at his concern. “I am,” she said.

A cluster of Gamorreans were gathered around a pair of game tables in the lower landing. Ruth scythed among them. Tebbith followed up, though at the last all he could do was blank pain from the man whose arm had been severed. It wasn’t much of a contribution.

But he felt something else, further down the row. He felt a bruised spot where the Force ran weak. He felt something within it, and it justified everything.

The hallway had a low arched ceiling in yellowish stone, with yellow metal doors set into the walls at short intervals. Wynston darted ahead to the turn, and, after scanning, turned back. “Which one?” he said.

“All of them?” muttered Ruth. “Stars know a Hutt’s idea of jailable offenses doesn’t exactly match reality.”

“We don’t have the information for justice today,” said Wynston, and sounded like he meant it.

Tebbith slid by Ruth, turning shoulders sideways to avoid touching her on the way, and looked around Wynston. “Third on the left,” he said, and moved.

He activated his lightsaber again at the right door. Wynston made a shushing gesture and raised a small metallic disc to the control panel. A moment’s hum. Tebbith felt Ruth peering around him. A click, and the door slid open.

The cell inside was dank, lit only by a lump of a lamp in the corner. Inside was a woman who was snapping to a hugged-knees position. She looked blearily up.

And she and Ruth said, in perfect unison, “You have got to be kidding me.”

[Wynston]

The woman in the jail cell was of pleasing proportions, undeniable even in her baggy sackcloth. She had a thick braid of yellow hair that caught the light and threw it back in ripples. She was fair-skinned, with amber eyes at present very wide. Wynston found her immediately interesting. Just as he had, years ago.

Tebbith had lied outright about their objective. “Larr Gith,” he said. “Pleased to see you again.”

The woman scrambled to her feet. “Who the hell is this? Egrin?”

“Wynston, actually. I’m flattered you remember. Ziost was a busy time.”

“And you’re working with the Emperor’s Wrath?”

“She came to help,” volunteered Tebbith. “I am sorry I misled you all. I didn’t want you to abandon her just because she’s one of the powerful Jedi alive.”

Larr Gith rolled her shoulders and swayed. Wynston darted in to support her as she rose to her full height, several inches taller than him. She kept a slim muscle-twined arm looped around his
shoulders. “Teb,” she said in a deep, lilting voice, “you are one in a trillion. But these guys?”

Tebbith stared, dark eyes wide. He didn’t seem prepared for the vision he had uncovered. “I’m… sorry, Master Larr?”

Larr Gith heaved a sigh. “Too late now. Shall we get out before the guards come and put me right back here?”

“I don’t know, that doesn’t sound too bad,” muttered Ruth.

[Ruth]

“You have got to be kidding me,” echoed a voice in Ruth’s head. She ignored it.

It was on the landing with the grisly Gamorrean scene that Ruth’s holo beeped. She would have ignored it, but she had a bad feeling about this.

The person who came up was a Hutt. It trilled laughter that sounded like it had been produced through helium. “Lord Niral! I had no idea!”

“Hoboru,” Ruth said tightly. “So sorry I forgot to say hi.”

“Don’t be silly, I know you’re here. I have your operative.” The Hutt gestured. The image flickered to Theron, standing between two Nikto in coarse uniforms. Ruth’s heart dropped several inches. The image flicked back to Hoboru.

“How much do you want for his return?” said Ruth.

“The cost of at least twenty surveillance cameras, for starters,” squeaked the Hutt. “Oh, and I’ll be sending more guards. You can get another shielded cell next to your dear friend Larr Gith. I can build my own Dark Council!”

“Hey,” said Larr Gith.

“Theron,” she said, “hang in there. We will come.”

Hoboru growled, a high bubbling sound. Ruth heard something else. Someone saying, with great relief, “Senya.”

The holo cut out.

Time slowed, and far things came suddenly in focus while near ones blurred. Ruth rolled her eyes, which spared her several seconds of looking at Valkorian.

“Trivia,” he said. “You realize this? My son is the true threat.”

Ruth shook her head, hard. “And I’ll point our new friends at him when the time is right. Are you done?”

“You cannot delay forever.”

“Let me go. There’s work to do.”

“The time may come when I choose not to.”

Ruth snarled. “Not today.”
Things slid back to the way they had been, and it was over.

“We need to run,” said Wynston. Feet were pounding down the stairs.

Ruth had both her sabers deactivated. Reluctant though she was to take the next step, she knew it was necessary. She held one out. “Larr, how are you feeling about fighting?”

Larr Gith stared. “Are you crazy? I was in there for months! Starving!”

“How are you feeling about saving your sorry life?”

Larr Gith held out a hand. “Fine.”

The battle in the staircase was protracted and ugly. Ruth kept having to step aside to clear bodies while Tebbith stepped up. In the first lull of quiet the party sprinted up the stairs to the ground floor of the tower.

“Tactically bad,” said Wynston.

“It’s also tactically bad to be buried ten bodies deep. We need to get to Hoboru’s main hall.”

“Ruth, that’s—”

“Manageable,” said Tebbith. He was looking surprisingly green for a Zabrak, but he was radiant in the Force. “You people have proved your mettle. Let me help.”

Their progress down the boulevards now was not secret at all. Ruth found herself unable to keep up with Tebbith’s sweeps of Force power and hurled wreckage; she extended a hand and started gripping and snapping the droids in her way. It had gone from irritating to exhilarating.

And when living things attacked them, she eliminated them before her poor Jedi Tebbith would have to.

Larr Gith was hanging back near Wynston, deflecting blaster fire away from him. Ruth would be glad to blame her for not doing more, but even an idiot deserved some consideration under hard circumstances. Together the party rolled on.

Only to find two people sprinting out of a huge hall’s front doors and down its wide steps. Ruth’s heart soared to recognize Theron and Senya. She leaped ahead to deal with the droids skittering in pursuit. She felt Tebbith’s broad sweeps around her while she rained damage on her opponents.

But, she reminded herself, the point was to leave. She ran with the others. Wynston spotted a trio of speeders and efficiently sliced their controls. Tebbith lifted Larr Gith onto the seat in front of him; Senya and Wynston took another; Ruth jumped aboard behind Theron.

And they got out of there.

[Tebbith]

Tebbith sat uneasily in the Fury. “Master Larr, I’m sorry we don’t have more in the way of food.”

“It’s fine,” she said through a ration bar. “I assume, based on the complete lack of décor and things required by normal human beings, that this is Imperial. Ruth’s, maybe?”

“Only indirectly,” Ruth said coolly.
“Why her? Why not the Jedi?” said Larr Gith, impaling Tebbith on a dual amber stare. Padawans had been known to cry from that look alone.

“It’s complicated,” Tebbith said miserably.

“Hmph. Do they have clothes where we’re going?”

“Yes!” yelped Ruth.

“Good.” Larr Gith pouted. “I should thank you, Teb.”

“Imagine that,” muttered Ruth. Wynston shot Ruth a meaningful look.

“Master Larr was indispensable in our investigation of the Revanites,” said Senya.

“Yeah, she was a real champ,” Theron said quickly.

“Oh, I recall her championship very well,” muttered Ruth.

“Something you want to share with the class?” Larr Gith said sourly.

“Oh, yes. Let’s start with a question. What possible good can you be for the Alliance?”

“The who?” said Larr Gith. “And is that why Teb hasn’t kicked your ass yet?”

Tebbith cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t really kick your, um, fundament, Lord Niral.”

Ruth squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Tebbith, could you please get her up to speed?”

Larr Gith listened in horror to Tebbith’s recitation of the Alliance and its Wrath-inspired adventures. Get drugged and locked up for a few months and the entire galaxy goes to hell.

“The Emperor?” she said.

“Yes,” said Tebbith.

“In her head?” she said.

“I’m afraid so,” said Tebbith.

The Wrath hadn’t reclaimed her second lightsaber. Larr Gith swept it out and thumbed the activation control, coming across in one blinding arc.

Ruth drew, activated, and blocked. Larr Gith’s onslaught was crazed as she poured her power into wild swings and flourishing cuts. Ruth fell back a few steps, her movements economical and frankly kind of anemic. Larr Gith almost landed a stroke through her head. Ruth in turn raised a hand and Force shoved Larr Gith back into Tebbith’s bulk.

That’s when she felt it. A force at the back of her neck. Lifting.

She kept her borrowed lightsaber alight. “He’s in your head?”

“Yes,” said Ruth.
“And nowhere else.”

“Not that I know of.”

“And you’re still alive because…?”

Ruth scowled over her saber. “I’m persuasive.”

“This galaxy would be better off if I made you one with the floors here and now.”

“I think you’ll find a significant voting bloc wants a guaranteed solution. Not just murdering me and hoping for the best.”

Larr Gith saw the taciturn Senya nodding agreement, and frowned. “Voting is for people who aren’t fabulous.”

Ruth tilted her head and snarled.


His voice came through anxious behind her. “Yes, Master Larr.”

“Put. Me. Down.”
Busy day! Larr Gith reacts to the news of Ruth’s passenger. Tebbith and Larr Gith settle in with introductions. Wynston and Lana discuss risk calculations. Larr Gith rebuffs Ruth. Tebbith meets Koth. Everybody meets the Firebrand. (Larr Gith, Tebbith, Ruth, Wynston, Sana-Rae, Koth, Firebrand)

The grip on the back of Larr Gith’s neck eased. Her toes, then her heels got reacquainted with the ship’s floor. She deactivated her borrowed saber and held out its handle for Ruth to take.

Ruth kept her saber active, but reached out with her free hand. As she grasped the handle, Larr Gith Force shoved her as hard as she could, sending her skidding to the far side of the compartment and slamming her against the wall. The guttural noise the Sith made was worth it.

“You know,” Ruth growled, “we’re running an Alliance against the Emperor’s Empire. With some side research on how to eliminate the Emperor himself. You’ll have lots of things to push around.”

“Stopping the Eternal Empire?” After the Jedi Council had denied Larr Gith’s request for a seat, she had resolved not to work with them again. Not even to fight the new badness. But an independent organization, desperately in need of better-looking leaders…

Larr Gith deactivated her borrowed saber. “Fine,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

They were home. Finally. Larr Gith was eating more. Ruth wasn’t. Instead she was trying to get a handle on the friendly Jedi.

Ruth looked at Wynston. Wynston looked at Ruth.

And Wynston was looking for clarification. “You’re the Barsen’thor of the Jedi Order. You’re one of the most powerful Force users alive. And you want to run the library?”

Tebbith beamed. “Yes.”

Wynston looked at Ruth. Ruth looked at Wynston.

“Okay,” said Ruth.

“We may need–”

“It’s okay, Wynston.” Ruth could understand needing something other than the fight.

“Well then,” said Larr Gith, dabbing her full pink lips with her napkin, “I’m done. Do we get beds here, or is that not rough-and-ready rebel enough?”

“There’s one more stop we should make, Master Larr,” said Tebbith.

Ruth looked at Wynston. Wynston looked at Ruth.
“There is?” said Ruth.

“You mentioned a central meeting spot for Force users?” said Tebbith. “With your permission, I’d like to check in.”

Ruth led the way. Wynston trailed the Jedi. She had no illusions as to why. But Tebbith had been a model ally so far, and Larr Gith was just Larr Gith, exactly as she’d known her on Yavin. If there weren’t any publicity stunts available to her she was more or less housebroken.

They entered the enclave chamber. Sana-Rae was visible, a slender figure in patterned robes, over at the very far edge of the room. She turned the instant the Jedi stepped in, and approached.

“Sana-Rae,” said Ruth. “Our recent guests, Barsen’thor Tebbith of the Jedi Council and Jedi Larr Gith.”

“Master. Jedi Master Larr Gith.”

“I have seen you,” Sana-Rae said warmly.

Larr Gith perked up. “You have?”

“I am a Mystic. I see visions of what the future will be. I knew you, if not your name.”

“Oh,” purred Larr Gith, “we are going to be friends. You’ll need to tell me all about me.”

“Er, hello,” Tebbith added uncomfortably. “Nice to meet you.”

“Right, him too,” said Larr Gith. “All right, Miss Handler, tour’s over. I’m fine.”

Somebody beeped behind them all. Ruth frowned and turned. T7-01 was zipping down the walkway, its head spinning wildly.

Larr Gith was the only person who looked more happy than surprised. “Teeseven! They didn’t scrap you!”

The droid so named beeped some more. Ruth had no idea what dialect it spoke, but it spilled a torrent of digital noises at Larr Gith and Larr Gith bent over and kissed its battered disc of a head. “Oh they are not keeping you at entry-level clearance anymore, little buddy. Not while I’m here.” She straightened and shot a glance at Sana-Rae. “I’ll be back for you, friend. Stars, is this place great or what?”

*

“There you are.” Larr Gith turned from the cantina bar to see the handsome cyborg Red Jacket, Theron or whatever he called himself.

“The steering committee’s having a meeting,” he said. “As the VIP in residence you’re invited to see what we’re doing here in the Alliance.”

“Do I get to sit by you?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “All the commentary you can stand. Come on.” He tossed a credstick to the bartender and beckoned to Larr to fall in step beside her.

The cantina was a long sinuous affair featuring more species than Larr had ever seen on Tython. The architecture might charitably be termed found materials; any generic warehouse might have
been reconfigured like this with a few hours’ effort. The hallways, too, were prefab, unmarked by creator or personality. The Alliance had star power, especially now that Larr was here, but it didn’t have much of a place to call home.

“I hope your quarters are to your liking,” said Red Jacket. “A step up from Jedi housing, anyway.”

“A plastoid bag is a step up from Jedi housing,” said Larr. One of the many reasons she had gone freelance. “This is at least a step and a half. If you’re saying you’d be open to an upgrade…”

Red Jacket coughed. “I’ll see if C2 can’t find you something.”

Not unless this C2 had some very specific attachments, it didn’t. So they went on. “You guys don’t do windows here?”

“Most of this is underground. We’ve eased up on the windows policy since then, but all the original work…well.” He darted ahead and pushed open a high door. “Please.”

Larr Gith stepped into the headquarters of the rebellious Alliance. It was partly natural stone and partly that same unhappy dealer of generic construction goods. Seats were scattered around, and people on the seats.

“Theron,” said the tall blonde Sith by the hulking center console. Right. Larr could remember that.

“Morning,” he said. “I thought Master Larr should get to observe the festivities a little. Let her know what she’s in for.”

“If I decide to stay,” Larr said loudly. Tebbith sat up straighter in his chair, staring pleadingly at her. “Right, when I stay. You people.”

“The problem at the moment is this,” said Lana. “We have some access to Imperial resources for our next move. We have some access to Republic resources – particularly Masters Tebbith and Larr themselves, naturally.” Teb nodded. Larr decided on a regal nod of her own. “Today isn’t the day we use that. But we have to keep our hands in the game.”

“Lana’s been the master organizer since this started,” Theron said quietly. “Her word is effectively the Alliance’s word.”

“So she’s in charge.”

“I…dunno. Ruth has pretty extensive power.”

“Because she’s got the Emperor riding around in her head.”

“Yes.”

“Which makes her the opposite of someone we want in charge.”

“She has it under control.”

“But not, not to put too fine a point on it, dead.” Larr snorted. “Anyway.” She looked at the woman with what looked like stones studding her forehead. “Sorry, did you let a Zakuulian fashion plate in?”

“Senya. She’s a friend.”

“To who?”
“Us,” Theron said decisively.

Motion caught her eye from a corner near Lana: the dark-clad Chiss, hefting a flask. “And Egrin’s an alcoholic?”


“So your steering team is the Emperor who wants to kill us all, his right-hand woman-slash-roommate, one of his minions, a Sith who has ‘better to reign in hell’ tattooed on her forehead, and a guy who actually just followed up a drink with a drink.” She nodded at Wynston, who was toying with the flask again. “And this is freedom’s future at work?”

“They’ve survived. They’ve held back the Empire. They’re going to take down Arcann and Vaylin.”

“With help, and lots. Me and Teb,” she said, waving at the Zabrak Master. “Boy, he had no idea when he was kicking me off Tython that we would end up here.”

“You– what?”

“And now, best friends. Stars know you guys need it. – Did you know your cantina doesn’t stock any hoss shots?”

Theron rocked back on his heels. “…not…exactly the feedback I was expecting, but okay. We can start there.”

* 

Ruth rapped in the doorway to the modest suite that Tebbith had requested for library access. He was kneeling in the middle of it, glowing. He opened his eyes and stood to his normal considerable height.

And bowed. “Madam Outlander.”

“Master Tebbith. I hope you’re finding the accommodations to your liking.”

“Very generous, thank you. Was there something you wanted?”

“I have a list, Master Tebbith, that is very long and getting longer each day. It is the scenarios I need to intervene in if I am to maintain this Alliance’s existence. When people join the Alliance, the first thing I ask them…well. Is whether they truly want to be here.”

“I will not deny my calling, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“The second thing I ask is whether they can help me check things off that list. You’ve indicated you don’t want to go into the field. Why? You acquitted yourself brilliantly in freeing your friend.”

“I don’t think you want to drill into my past any more than I want to question yours. I’m sorry. That’s all I can say.”

“But you’ll help us here.”

“In the library. In the infirmary. Yes.”

She shifted her weight and wished her stare could be more persuasive. “I’ve met many Jedi who
said ‘there is peace,’ but I don’t think I’ve ever met a pacifist.”

He just bowed again. “Then I give you something new. I should get to work.”

*

Not to be deterred by the shenanigans of a ragtag collection of would-be revolutionaries, Arcann starts bombarding planets in his hunt for the Outlander or satisfaction, whichever he can get first…

*

Wynston and Lana got back to their ship in ragged order. Wynston’s utility belt was nearly depleted. Lana was limping. Both of them were counting the seconds. They proceeded to their respective chairs on the bridge and strapped in.

It wasn’t until they had reached orbit that anyone spoke. Lana got up and took a few restless, uneven steps. “Wynston.”

He looked her over, never an unpleasant activity. “Are you all right, Lana?”

“I’m fine.” Lana slammed the hyperdrive into action and returned her attention to Wynston. “But.”

“What?”

“Have you lost your mind? What were you thinking, hurling yourself into a gang showdown like that? You might have been killed!”

Wynston raised his eyebrows and kept his voice even. “You might have been killed’ has been my tagline all week, or hadn’t you noticed?”

“I’m serious. Standard protocol says you walk when the odds get that high.”

“Sod standard protocol, they would have killed you.”

“And if they could kill a Sith what possible means did you think you have of stopping them?”

“We did, didn’t we? Center group: flash-bang grenades. Outliers, sonic bomb. You handle most of the stunned men in melee. I clear the ones behind you. I pick off their sentries. You’re good at not being where blaster bolts are. It’ll be enough until I can clear the edges. Likelihood of success against those numbers and that training, upwards of seventy percent.”

“That’s not great.”

“Do you prefer it to a hundred for me and zero for you? Because I don’t. I have a good idea of your limits and I wouldn’t put you in a situation that exceeds them. And if you end up there anyway, you’re damn right I’d take risks to get you out.”

They flew in silence.

Lana’s voice was a little lower when it returned. “I always considered you a pragmatist.”

“I am. You’re worth a lot more to us alive than dead.” A pause. “That’s all.”

Another pause.
Lana cleared her throat. “We did make rather a good job of it, didn’t we?”

Wynston laughed. “I would expect nothing less.”

*Lana wondered, briefly, what he would do if she just walked up and kissed Wynston. Those infamous hands, that legendary tongue – she’d heard the stories. Once upon a time he had deleted the records of his existence, but the stories of his exploits lived on, circulating at odd times from assorted people passing through. Oddly, he had left his mark on the galaxy, and the galaxy was still a little out of breath from the experience.

She wondered if he really did like pleasuring women that much. Had that been burned out of him? Or was he just awaiting the right touch? Lana could hold her own, she had no doubt about that. Maybe…maybe someday. Maybe someday soon.

She liked his controlled grace, his crooked smile. Maybe there were other things to like. Did he trust her? Was trust even a requirement for him? Soon.

So he wondered what drove her. Several things, curiosity not least.

*Larr Gith was getting to know Sana-Rae, her strange brushed voice and lovely patterned skin tragically buried under less excitingly patterned robes, when the Wrath stalked up.

“Larr,” she said in that queen-bitch voice that had hectored thousands into battle before and probably would again the next time the Sith got excited.

“We’ll talk,” said Larr Gith, and turned to the Wrath. “What?”

“We haven’t spoken in six years. I thought we should talk about your role here.”

“Is this where you find out what kind of woman I am? Ask the probing questions that’ll reveal my soul so you understand whether you can rely on me?”

“Can I?”

“Yes. We can stop pretending to be friends now.”

Larr Gith had always imagined that Ruth Niral looked that stuck-up under her mask. “You realize you’ll be taking missions from Sith.”

“And your Theron boy. Hon, back on Ziost I saved the galaxy next to Scythia while you were off answering the Emperor’s emails. I’ll turn it around when I get to the field. I always do.”

*Koth found the big Jedi standing outside at the landing pads, looking around.

“Escaping so soon?” Koth said casually.

The Jedi all but jumped. “I find the traffic soothing,” he said. “Everybody there is going to the stars. Thirty thousand years ago that must have seemed like a miracle.”

“Old news by now,” said Koth. “There are more ships in orbit. Holocams are available if you want
to scope any of them out.”

Tebbith smiled sheepishly. “It’s really nothing. I’ll have all the schematics in the library anyway.”

“We have a library?”

“You will. The Outlander has given me clearance to build one.”

“That’s…surprisingly obliging for her.”

“She has been very kind thus far.”

“I guess she did help us all escape without complaining. That puts her ahead of some of the people I’ve had under my command.”

“Command? I didn’t realize. Do you have a title?”

“Captain’s fine. Captain Vortena.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Captain Vortena.” The funny thing was, he really seemed to mean it.

“Good to have you aboard, Master Tebbith. You ever need a shot of sanity…well, don’t look here.” He grinned. “See you around.”

*

The Firebrand: a terrorist embedded in Zakuul’s underbelly, carrying out bombings and acts of anarchy throughout the civilized topside. It was a natural fit for Ruth’s alliance. Or at least, it might be. Wynston and Lana were detached to evaluate. So when the alliance’s connections arranged for an arms deal, the two of them went down together to meet the Firebrand.

“I don’t believe it.”

When Wynston had walked into the alley he’d had the usual discomfort of a career problem element who is putting himself in the way of any unknown number of problem elements. He expected to have to talk his way out of whatever came for him. What he hadn’t expected was recognition.


The first impulse was to draw, fire, and never stop firing. But her barrel was already aimed steady and he could never make it to a trigger on time. So as he saw it there were three ways to play this. Cold professional, expansive joker, or jilted romantic. Three ways to play this, and at least two would kill him.

“Kaliyo Djannis,” he said, trying to match her theatrical amusement. If she was amused she wasn’t killing. Yet. “You’re the Firebrand?”

“Ha. That’s just what the locals call me to brighten their sad little lives.” Her finger curled. Wynston watched it. He knew she knew he was watching it. It was almost like old times. “Now. Something tells me you didn’t bring my explosives.”

Lana Beniko cleared her throat. Never had Wynston been so conflicted to hear his backup arrive. Did it offer a way out? For which of the three participants?
Lana walked up beside Wynston. Hands up, Wynston noted. An interesting act of trust. Shooting from the shadows might have been their best chance to get out alive. But then, Lana didn’t know Kaliyo. She had no way of knowing.

And yet...Kaliyo. Kaliyo Djannis. Kaliyo Worst-Idea-Ever Djannis. Alive, with those big black lips, those silver eyes...

“Should I be impressed?” Kaliyo said innocently.

Professional. “Kaliyo, my associate Lana Beniko. Lana, Kaliyo Djannis, career disturbance of the peace.”

Kaliyo smiled. “What’s the boy told you about himself? Ever mention me? We almost got married. I was going to make an honest man out of him.”

Smiling, without really smiling. “It would take considerably more than my hand to drag honesty out of you.”

“Aww. Still mad? Don’t ever worry about making him furious, it just makes the makeup time better.”

“Kaliyo, can we focus on the here and now?”

“What, with her watching? You were never that freaky. Well, except that one time… and I forget, did I mention the camera at the time?”

Wynston shifted his focus but not his gaze to Lana. “Kaliyo has been setting fire to Zakuul for fun and profit.”

“I see that,” Lana said crisply. “We’ve been sent by the Outlander to discuss the possibility of an alliance.”

Kaliyo laughed that wide-mouthed laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re the Outlander,” she said to Wynston.

“No,” he said, “but you and I have worked with her.”

Kaliyo stared for a few seconds, silver eyes intent. Then the corners crinkled into shadow. “Ha! Get out. Is there ever a time you’re not banging the most powerful person in the room?” Her lips curved closed and the sole motion in her was her eyes turning to Lana and rolling down, then up. “Sith, huh? They do seem to last longer.”

“If you’re interested in bringing Zakuul down,” Lana said with prodigious self-possession, “our interests align.”

“I haven’t aligned my interests with your friend in years. Broke his heart, really.” She switched back to Wynston. “Still think of me when you’re plowing Miss Vanilla? Or, you know,” back to Lana, “whoever.”

Three ways to play this. Cold professional, expansive joker, or jilted romantic. Three ways to play this, and at least two would kill him.

“I think of you for a lot of things,” he said, “some of which you might actually do these days. Hence the invite, unless you’ve stopped liking money and creative license.”
“Hey. You were the one bitching about creative license last time. Are you telling me you’re ready to make some noise?”

“I can hook you up with more noise than either one of us has time to direct, though we can certainly try. We’d even get paid for it. Like old times, but without Imperial regulations. Interested?”

Kaliyo lowered her blaster. The horizons of Wynston’s life expanded and breathed. “Wynce,” she said, “I never thought you’d ask.”

He let the nickname slide. He held dead still, mind racing for the tool or trick he could produce, as she walked sway-hipped toward him. She stopped, leaned forward, studied his face. He knew for a fact she was terrible at reading his moods. It wasn’t as much comfort as one might think.

She smiled, slowly, sensually, that smile that promised worlds of forbidden fun. And she could deliver. He knew how very much she could deliver. All for the low low price of his integrity. And, sooner or later, his life.

He smiled back.

“If we’re going to be such good friends,” she purred, “there’s something you should help me with.”

That’s when Wynston heard it. “Down!” he barked, finally letting his itching palm join his pistol. She didn’t move as fast as she used to; probably deciding whether to believe him. He shoved her, following her down as the bolts of a Skytrooper droid shrieked above.

“How about you shoot high, I shoot low,” she sang, and for a few moments it was as if they’d never been apart.

Of course, it couldn’t last. She was back to business as soon as the droids were down. What could he do for her in exchange for this partnership? Her big idea was blowing something up. Of course it was blowing something up.

And Wynston helped her with it, because that’s what it took to get Kaliyo on their side. And he knew, better than anyone left in this galaxy, just how much destructive capability she had, and how far they could go with that capability at their disposal. So yes. He helped.

Kaliyo had kept up a happy chatter while they worked. She directed most of it at Lana, ostensibly filling her in on what she needed to know about Wynston. If he could have silenced her without setting her off he’d have done it. Early. Very, very early.

Afterward Kaliyo retired to the largest bedroom on the ship, nonchalantly tossing Wynston’s gear out the door before closing down. Wynston made for the crew bunks. Lana Beniko was there, brushing her golden hair.

She looked in her mirror at him. He forced himself to look back. “Lana?”

“Yes?” she said coolly.

“I can explain.”
Lana pushed some hair out of her face and came up with glassy composure. “I really don’t see what needs explaining.”

“She’s a liar, compulsive. Everything she says is calculated for maximum chaos.”

“Then you didn’t work together?”

“Well, we did.”

“And you weren’t involved?”

“Well, in a way.”

“Quite seriously?”

“You have to understand that her definition of serious is twisted.”

“You didn’t go on a double agent mission that ended with the slaughter of your entire embedded team?”

“There was provocation.”

“You didn’t serve as direct emissary of a Dark Council member that you’ve conveniently neglected to mention so far?”

“I stopped before he–”

“Or intentionally burned bridges with the Republic, the Chiss Ascendancy, and the Hutt Cartel?”

“Those were complex–”

“Or give her a job, a ship, and a salary to support her selling secrets to an anarchist cell?”

“I didn’t know that–”

“No, I really don’t think you have to explain anything. Amazing how well you work together after such a long separation. I understand the risk you took for her back there. She’s more valuable to us alive than dead, after all.”

Even he couldn’t explain why he had moved to protect her. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for the Empire,” he said. “Everything except her. But when I have an ally I stand by that ally.”

“Then why are you begging me to minimize her?”

“Because as allies go she’s as bad as it gets! I recommend–” not to say beg “–we table this until we get her to Ruth. She’ll decide. She’s found redeeming qualities in a lot of unlikely people before.”

“Yes,” Lana said crisply, never blinking, “I’m rapidly coming to realize that.”
You Might Understand Obsession

Chapter Summary

Another busy day! Kaliyo returns to Odessen and re-meets Ruth. Koth reacts to the terrorist in their midst. Tebbith tries to improve the new library. Senya tries to adjust to Force use without cultishness. Ruth and Larr Gith recruit a Republic special ops defector. Ruth also recruits an old Imperial contact. Wynston relaxes by reminiscing. Ruth and Jorgan have a moment. Theron helps Ruth’s search, and Valkorion objects to it. (Kaliyo, SCORPIO, Ruth, Wynston, Tebbith, Larr Gith, Senya, Sana-Rae, Jorgan, Pierce, Theron, Valkorion)

“Kriffin’ a, woman, you haven’t aged a day.”

Ruth looked up from her console in ops. Her eyes widened. “Kaliyo?”

Wynston stalked in. “Ruth. Meet the Firebrand.”

“Ha,” said SCORPIO from every speaker in the room.

“And it all makes sense,” said Ruth. “It’s been a while.”

“You’re telling me,” said Kaliyo. “Carbonite sleep?”

“A little. You?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” continued SCORPIO.

“Usin’ my skills. Like I will for you.” Kaliyo’s black lips smoothed to a wider curve. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Wynston, I…um.”

“I have no guarantees for you this time,” said Wynston. “But you know her capabilities.”

“Exactly,” said Koth, staring. “You just took her off a terrorist attack on my people and now we’re letting her in? Why?”

Larr Gith stepped forward. “Wait, terrorists? What does this glorious love child of the Sith and Zakuul want with one lousy terrorist? You are the terrorists.”

“But I can show you strait jackets how it’s really done,” said Kaliyo. “It’ll be fun.”

Lana cleared her throat. Kaliyo and SCORPIO only laughed.

“Wynston…” said Ruth.

He gave her a defiant look. “Let me make one thing clear this time around. I am not making myself responsible for her actions.”

Koth glared. So did Lana. Larr Gith joined in on general principle.
“I understand,” said Ruth. “Come here, Kaliyo.”

The Rattataki pouted. “You gonna throw the book at me?”

Ruth’s eyes were about as hard as she could make them. “I could do that from here. Trust me.”

*

“She blew up what?”

“It was a job,” said Ruth. “We’re employing her now.”

“You are shredding Zakuul piece by piece and then telling me to be happy about the scraps you’re ripping out of it!” Koth pointed where Kaliyo had gone. “I am not working where that – that – woman is!”

“We can put you on field work,” said Lana.

“Want me to tell you where you can put your field work?” said Koth. “You guys want to loot Zakuul and blow up the remnants? Fine. But I won’t be part of it.”

“Koth, think about this,” said Wynston.

Koth leveled his furious gaze. “You of all people should be on my side. You think these Sith care what happens to men like us?”

“Slow down,” said Theron. “I know they care. You know they care.”

“You– don’t get to talk,” seethed Koth. “Of course you’re protected now that you’ve one hundred percent sold out. I’m out.”

They didn’t realize the Gravestone was missing until late, late that night, and by then Koth Vortena was gone.

*

The room Tebbith had been assigned as a library was not large. It might’ve become an apartment for one of the command staff. He had taken a small studio for himself and his personal collection. Here in the larger chamber he had set up a circle of reading chairs, then erected shelves and started installing consoles and a small collection of holocrons. He enjoyed integrating holocrons. They always had something new to show him.

But the space would be used up rapidly if the Alliance kept delivering things to him, and Hylo VIlsz and Doctor Oggurobb already had dozens of suggestions. Something had to give.

He poked his head out to the hallway and looked around. Nobody in sight. He double-checked the schematics of Odessen base. These were usually obsolete before they were even uploaded, but he thought he had the space.

He checked the hallway again. Then he walked to the back of the chamber and raised his hands.

The seams of the room grew obvious to him while he wrenched the metal wall free of the bedrock.

“Teb!” Larr Gith all but screamed.

Tebbith jumped and spun. “It was for the library!” he spouted. “I’m sorry!”
Larr Gith leaned around him. “And here I thought I was the only person who couldn’t stand the prefab décor. What were you going to do?”

“Just dig out another bay for the databanks,” he said miserably. “You won’t tell the Outlander, will you?”

“Teb, you’re thirtysomething years old and twice as powerful as anybody else here except me. You don’t have to freak out about Mommy. Besides, stick it in the blueprints, nobody’s going to notice. Want a hand?”

He unhunched a little bit. “I…really?”

“We Jedi have to stick together, Teb. And really, they’re not using my talents to the full here.”

“You are talented at more than making excavations.”

She made a modest pout. “I do precisely what the situation calls for,” she said sweetly. “Now come on, you take right and I’ll take left.”

*

Senya took her time walking through the enclave. She eyed the people at combat practice critically. They had strange ways of fighting, lessons from the various Jedi and Sith who passed through this place. Senya was one of the few regulars who also had a say on the inner council. Ruth kept to herself, as if enough time spent sitting there wishing could contact her son; Tebbith gave a few reluctant lessons and then went back to his databanks; Lana was surgically grafted to the big console in ops, detaching herself only for off planet missions.

And Larr Gith…

Larr Gith was standing with the Voss Sana-Rae. There was a fine aurodium chain around the Voss’s neck, and the pendant at the end was in Larr’s cupped palm.

“Really?” purred the Human. “All that in one little pendant…” Larr started gathering the chain in her hands, bringing her intent face closer.

Senya cleared her throat. “Sana-Rae. Larr.”

The Voss jumped guiltily. Larr Gith didn’t. She just let the pendant fall back to Sana-Rae’s chest, and smiled. “Hello, Mother.”

Well, it couldn’t stay a secret forever, especially not from one who had so quickly ascended to command. “I’d remember giving birth to you,” she said flatly.

“Excellent point. I should run.” She winked at Sana-Rae. “We’ll be talking later.” She sashayed past Senya. That woman always played like she had an audience, and, Senya had to admit, she was usually right.

Senya let her go. “Sana-Rae. All’s well?”

The pink areas of the Voss’s face might have been a little darker than usual. “Yes,” she said in that oddly brushed voice. “All is well?”

“As much as can be expected. I am still…” She looked over Sana-Rae’s head and sighed. “When you spend your life developing your power as service to one person, and that one person goes off
the rails as completely as Valkorion has, it is…difficult, to stay confident in one’s affinity for the Force.”

“He is not the Force. Look at the Jedi. Look at the Sith.”

“I’m looking. I just can’t believe my eyes most of the time.” She shook out her sword arm. “Come. One less-than-mainstream initiate to another. Let’s make sure we can keep up. I can’t count on my children having the same crises of faith I do.”

*

“Soldiers,” said Senya. “Do we always have to get the deserters?”

“Until such time as I get requisition authority from the Senate or the Council,” said Ruth. “Actually…”

“Your private guard was subsumed by Acina and Scythia,” said Wynston. “You’ll need to start from the ground up.”

“Fine,” said Ruth. “Let’s see this Havoc.”

*

They met in the murk below Zakuul proper. Jorgan greeted them from, he was careful to note, the far end of a scope.

But he came out from the underbrush, sniper rifle in hand, and nodded at Ruth and her allies. “It wasn’t all that long ago that I’d have given up my pension to take that shot,” he said in a grumbly voice.

“You get pensions,” she said. “Almost like you expect to live past forty.”

“Hm. Yeah, we usually only die when our enemies stab us. Did you want something here?”


“The Jedi haven’t done much for the Republic lately,” growled Jorgan. “We’re slowly consolidating into one dictatorship. What Havoc’s doing here? That’s not part of it.”

“That’s fine. The Jedi Council issued its last order to me…oh, a little while ago.”

“Fine. I am not planning to take Havoc back.”

Larr Gith’s amber eyes were huge. “Is that an offer?”

“Not sure yet. Let’s see you work.”

Zakuulian civilians. If only Koth hadn’t left so early. Impoverished, desperate: malcontents and idealists. Ruth had to tamp down her smile as Major Jorgan orchestrated the escape path for the rejects of the Eternal Empire. Larr Gith was excellent in combat, if flashy; she and Ruth kept the Knights of Zakuul pinned down while Jorgan worked behind them. As if that weren’t enough, Havoc produced plans for the transmitter center of the Eternal Fleet. One signal. One control.

One mission, when the time came right. The machinery of the Alliance started to churn.

*
“Outlander,” said Aygo. “Got wind of someone you might want to see.”

Ruth sighed. Ops was still infested with Republic soldiers, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to welcome anyone else in just yet. “Is it Imperial military? Because I could use a counterbalance.”

“As a matter of fact…”

She went.

General Pierce, first name not on record, stood head and shoulders above his listeners on the street of Dromund Kaas. He was pointing to a propaganda poster behind him and saying something in that gravelly boom. Recruitment, Aygo had told Ruth. Well, Pierce had never lacked for enthusiasm about his job.

Ruth walked quickly through the mist, ignoring everything outside her immediate path. He finally swung his head toward her and froze, grinning through a goatee that hadn’t strayed a hair from her memories. “Pierce,” she called. “Pierce, I didn’t believe it.” He had been there for the good, and the bad, and everything in between. He was the only one who had stayed for the Wrath. He stood like nothing in this life could shake him and she was inclined to agree. And he was smiling. She ran the last few steps and leaped to wrap her arms around his neck. He laughed and wrapped one thick arm around her. It was enough to keep her completely secure.

“Milord,” he said, still laughing. “Thought for sure you’d given me your last order.”

“Come with me. I need loyal people.”

He gave her a conspicuous once-over. “You’ve got one.”

As an afterthought she nudged herself away until he let her down. “Ahem,” she said. “Good. I have some new recruits and right now they’re being trained by a disavowed Republic strike team. I need someone a little more level-headed.”

“All right,” he said to the staring bystanders. “Lecture’s over. Have a nice life.”

He walked alongside her, no longer trailing in the guardsman’s spot. Interesting. “So,” he said conversationally, “did they put a chip in your head or something?”

“What?”

“It’s just, you never hugged me before.”

“I never spent five years kicking myself for not keeping you at my side before.”

“Stop it. I’m blushing.” They both laughed together. “Where to?”

“Oh. There’s a lot.”

“I’m listening.” He took a deep breath. “Anybody else from before?”

“Wynston. Kaliyo, believe it or not.”

“Kaliyo’s the one who kept one-upping her Gormak kill count by setting creative booby traps?”

“Yes.”

“Hell of a woman.” He grinned. “No wonder you wanted me.”
The search was taking forever. Wynston leaned back in his chair, cradled his flask over his chest, and idled.

He thought about reaching over to touch her montrals, lekku, scalp tattoos, pink mane, black kinks. Over the shape of it, pause to kiss her nose, that curiously species-invariant feature, and look at those ocean blue, sky green, cloud orange, limpid silver, shining black eyes. Down to shoulder, bare, any color you like, and down a flank hard and muscular or ridged and scale-skimmed or soft and supple or firm and downy or richly sink-in-ably curved...so many memories. He had been adding to the collection, usually one at a time, for a long time now.

“Anything yet?” The voice suited the polyphasic vision in his arms. The rest of his brain shrieked warning. He looked up and saw Lana glaring at the search window.

“Nothing,” he said, and sat up straight, thinking work thoughts. These other images were pale and blonde more often these days. He tried not to let that mean anything.

* 

Getting around Odessen could be a chore. By the time the lift reached Ruth’s level it already had one unhappy-looking Cathar soldier on it, but she wasn’t about to wait for the next one, so she stepped in and let it move.

The lift slowed before it ought to, and juddered to a halt. Ruth took a sharp look around, including at Major Jorgan. He too was looking around for threats.

“This happen often?” he said sharply. He was, after all, a relative newcomer.

“No,” she said. She peered at the crack between lift’s edge and the wall. “I think that’s too high for me to jump, much less you. I’ll holo maintenance.” And did so, while Jorgan stood there scowling.

Ruth wasn’t sure how to make small talk under these circumstances. Jorgan had joined the coalition for Larr Gith, not for anything Ruth had said or done. And while Larr Gith and Ruth had some things in common, they really did appeal to two very separate classes of people.


“Soldier,” growled Jorgan.

“Ah, of course.”

He was not to be outdone. “So. Lead assassin for the Empire.”

“Soldier.”

“Like hell.”

“My commander betrayed everything I fought for. Is that so hard to understand?”

“And when this is over?”

Was there something past that horizon? Her mind skipped instantly, achingly to Theron. “We’ll face that day when that day arrives.”

Jorgan scoffed. “I had a mission plan on how to take you out.”
“I didn’t.” He hadn’t merited that much attention. “If it’s all the same to you, I’m not going to keep a conversation on life support when there’s some perfectly good silence we could be coexisting in.”

“Done,” Jorgan said crisply, and turned away.

Well, he didn’t have to be so enthusiastic about it.

*

Ruth sauntered into the office. It was so rare, that relaxation from her strictly balanced gait. It meant she wasn’t being the Wrath. Theron liked that.

She eyed his console and raised her eyebrows. “At it again?”

“It passes the time,” he drawled.

“You don’t have to,” she said, and frowned. “I hate sitting here letting you do the work. If I knew how to navigate all this stupid data…”

“I got my degree in it. I really don’t mind.” Theron smiled until the distraction flicked at him. “Hold on. One query back.”

“A query?”

“Ask a simple question. Get ten more questions, if you’re lucky.” He sucked in his breath. “Or get one answer.”

“What is it?”

He tore his eyes away from the screen. “A little background first. The person who left Dromund Kaas with your son stayed on the move, rapidly. Back and forth, sometimes doubling back, but she never stayed on one planet longer than two hours.”

“Darth Scythia’s information said as much.”

“Right. That trail led to a little planet at the edge of Hutt space.”

“And?”

“Ah, here’s where Scythia’s people got stuck. According to the record, that flight was delayed en route. Nobody matching our boy’s description left within two hours of its late arrival. But if you take the original flight time and assume it did land on time, the trail picks up again. Someone faked that landing.”

The hope in Ruth’s blue eyes wrenched a hard twinge from his gut. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to,” he said. “I just needed to follow it up to be sure. Do you think I want to get your hopes up only to…?” He found his gaze skittering away from hers. “I mean, if nothing came of it.”

“Just tell me next time.”

Theron sighed. “Yeah. About that.”

“What?”
“I can trace them to Ord Mantell. Then, no woman-boy pairs leave for hours and those that do don’t have any of the names our pair has used so far. What changed there? I doubt it was their final destination, it’s too unstable to make a good home and anybody big enough to target the Emperor’s Wrath’s kid is too big for a planet like that.”

Ruth slumped. “So dead end?”

“No…exactly. Seven personal ships left that spaceport within two hours of Rylon’s incoming flight. No passenger manifest on record and they could’ve gone anywhere.” He flicked at the console display. “One was registered to a Jedi, which…good candidate, right?”

Ruth shuddered. Given the kinds of things that didn’t get a shudder out of her Theron was seriously worried about anything that could. “You’re right,” she said tightly.

“But it made it to the edge of the system, just about the range for hopping to hyperspace…and kaboom. No reason anyone can figure out. They didn’t find anything but wreckage.”

Ruth nodded. “Are you telling me,” she said, with a calm that laid a brittle chill across the whole galaxy, “that my son is dead?” So very calm, but sabers glistened in her eyes.

“No!” he said. “We don’t know, we can’t know yet. I’m still looking. I promise you I’m still looking.”

“There are still six ships,” she said.

“Yeah. Pretty good chances.”

“Chances.” She curled up two small white-knuckled fists. “Yes. He still has a chance.”

“Hey.” He reached for her hand. She still blushed when he did things like that in public, even in the semi-private space of the office. It was an endearing certainty.

But she remained pale as she accepted his grasp. “This trail is someone’s death sentence,” she said. “Every new clue brings me closer to the people responsible for stealing my child. I hope you realize that when I can finally be relevant I will make up for lost time.”

“I know, Ruth. I know.” Rylon was hers, simple as that. Given a direction, no force could stop her. Good thing she had a professional direction-finder on her side.

Ruth staggered in the hallway, raising her hands to a head that felt like an axe had just cleft it in half.

Valkorion appeared beside her, eyes blazing. “You fool. Why do you persist in this hopeless quest? The only children within your sphere of influence are mine, and you should focus on them.”

“Someday,” said Ruth, gripping her skull, “I will tell my son how I destroyed you.”

“My son will kill you while you pursue this fool’s errand. You, the premiere Force user of your civilization, six months of total concentration, for nothing – you’re seeking a corpse and trying to preserve the surprise by denying it to yourself. You. Must. Stop.”

“I have an entire alliance gathering the means to face your son. Believe me, I’ll deal with him when the time comes.”
“You could have ended this weeks ago!”

“Not with the resources we have. We can’t make it through the fleet and to the throne.”

“And if you’d actually been trying? You would have had a way around it by now.”

“May I point out that you might understand obsession but you do not understand love. My son is a part of me. All I’m doing is calling him home.”

“You will have no home. You will have no friends. You will have no rank. This fruitless effort will cost you everything. Change your course.”

“No. You know I never said that to you back when I had my child and you had my timecard? No. No. Not ever. Not until he is back with me. Now let me go.”

Valkorion folded his hands behind his back. “Yes. About that.” And he started to walk away.

Time did not resume, and the blurred edges nearest her did not return to focus. “Valkorion,” she said. “Valkorion!”

He turned his face in profile. “Oh,” he said softly. “How careless of me.” The visible half of his mouth smiled. “I do look forward to your happy family moments. Try not to wonder what a missed moment here and there might cost.” He snapped his fingers and turned away once more.

The headache hit again as reality flared into eye-searing detail. She didn’t realize she was down until she tried to take a step and discovered she was no longer at right angles to the floor.

“Someday soon,” whispered Valkorion, “you will learn.”
You Can Swoon

Chapter Summary

Ruth recruits an improbable ally on Ilum. Lana and Wynston discuss his prior connections. Ruth takes a step with Theron. The Alliance extricates itself from a planet after an objective. Ruth goes missing on planet while Theron and Wynston search. An old contact appears. (Ruth, Xalek, Lana, Wynston, Theron, T7-01, Larr Gith, Imperial Contact)

It was Sana-Rae’s vision, not Ruth’s that sent Ruth to the frozen wastes of Ilum. And at the end, what did she find? A Kaleesh Force adept, swimming in the Dark Side, seeking revenge for disturbed graves. Ruth helped him. What else could she do?

“What is your name?” she said at last. The blood of the local mining guild’s guards was still steaming on the snow beside them.

He tilted his head. His bone mask hid all but gleaming yellow eyes. “Lord,” he said, bowing slightly. “I am Xalek.”

“Xalek. Darth Scythia’s apprentice.”

He inclined his head.

“But you’re no longer in her service?”

He inclined his head.

There was a story there. But stories that sent people away from Scythia might be good ones to collect. Ruth coughed. “My allies tell me you may make a difference in the war. Will you come with me?”

Xalek started pacing. “I left my master when she held me back from this war. Now you want me to take it.”

This Dark Side blight, this creature like Ruth had been before she’d turned her life around? What could she teach him except remorse, and would he even understand that lesson? Could Sana-Rae manage him, or would Ruth’s tutelage be necessary?

“Yes,” she said, surprising herself. “Come with me.”

*Lana frowned at the readout. “Once it’s destroyed Zakuul won’t be able to recover its secrets.”

“But we could.” Wynston set his hands on his hips, still studying the readout. “Tebbith may be able to make something of the holocron if we take it. Maybe something that could help us against the Emperor.”

“It’s too risky. Destruction is a quick infiltration job.”*
“Lana. Trust me. I can get it back.”

Lana frowned some more.

“Look, if you’re not pleased with my past or my reputation, that’s your prerogative. But I have always taken you on your merits. And you know I can do this job right. Isn’t that what matters in this Alliance?”

Lana considered for only a moment further. “Very well. Do it.”

Wynston relaxed. “You know, you’re possibly the most reasonable Sith supervisor I’ve ever had.”

A blonde eyebrow arched. “Didn’t you work for Darth Jadus? My competition isn’t exactly sterling.”

“Still. You surprise me.”

“So do you. Almost daily.”

Wynston nodded as if filing the information away. “That’s bad for business. Expectations are best kept well calibrated, or you’ll let talent go to waste.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I ran Imperial Intelligence.”

“I knew there was a reason we got along.”

“Wynston.”

“Yes?”

“Stay safe. As safe as anything gets out there.”

“I always take reasonable precautions. I worked for Imperial Intelligence.”

They looked at one another for a moment, temporarily forgetting to be chatty.

Wynston caught himself first. “Until we meet again, Lana. I’ll come back with gifts.” He snapped off rather than continue whatever that was.

*

Ruth’s voice was barely audible through the door. “Mrfm. Mrmrrfm. Mrf.”

Theron knocked and went in.

Ruth jumped. It was almost hidden by the whirling, but it was there. Her fair skin was flushed, her blue eyes wide. “Theron!”

“Ruth. Am I interrupting?”

Her gaze swerved madly around the room. “N-no.”

“Am I pre-empting?”

“No.”
Until he knew what was going on, a grin was probably a bad idea. “Is there some other variety of bad timing I’m committing here?”

“No!” She looked aside. She was practically dusky. “Oh, Theron, no.”

“Then what’s wrong?” He stepped forward and reached for her hand. She squeezed back, harder than she should have. He tried not to let it show.

“It’s just,” she said. “It’s just that, it’s a big deal. I’ve never— I only ever— it didn’t— I mean— how do you just… say that? What if it doesn’t mean the same thing, what if it doesn’t mean anything, what if it… isn’t what you want?” Her gaze swung back to meet his, blisteringly intense. “Theron, I’ve tried, but there are some things I’m still not sure how to do.”

“Take a breath, babe. You know how to do that.”

She inhaled. She shuddered. She exhaled. “I’m being stupid. I apologize.”

She wasn’t being stupid. She was being sincere. Stars, when was the last time he’d done this with someone sincere? Did he even remember how? “It’s okay. I don’t even know what you’re being stupid about, so you could still come out of this looking good.”

She snorted. It came with the relief of her little smile. “I’m sorry. I’ve been thinking about this for… a long time, longer than I probably should have. I’ve wanted to. I ought to. It’s just so, so… dangerous, so— how is it ever a rational course of action to look someone in the eye and say—”

“I love you.” It seemed like the merciful thing to do. And stars knew it was true.

Her mouth fell open. “Do you?” she breathed.

“I, love, you.” His enemy, his overwhelming force, his impossibility made possible. “The way you move, the things you say, even when you think you’re falling apart you and I both know you can still take all comers. I… is that not what you were thinking about saying? Because if it isn’t I just made this very awkward.”

She pressed his hand, gently this time, and leaned in, pushing up on her toes, the tension gone from around her eyes. “Theron, I love you.”

He held still in an exaggerated attitude of listening for a few moments. “There. Galaxy didn’t end. I think we’re in the clear.”

She kissed him. Quietly, as though unwilling to startle him, his world rocked on its axis.

* 

The Eternal Fleet remained unstoppable head on, but planetside objectives could still be taken, two or three critical strikes for every planet the reluctant-to-split Fleet could menace. It would do until more isotope-5 powered cruisers could be brought online.

Oh, what an adventure that had been to arrange.

Wynston kept his blaster rifle raised as he walked Larr Gith, Ruth, and T7-01 out of the palace. He would have loved to see Tebbith’s reputed diplomatic skills, but the Jedi was still making buswork back home. Meanwhile the improbable Sith/Jedi duo had made a friend today, but their friend wasn’t the only power on this planet.
In fact, a dozen representatives of the other power opened fire as soon as they hit the city street.

Wynston didn’t pretend to understand the workings of the Force. He did understand the cutthroat tactics of Ruth and her red lightsabers and the elegant footwork of Larr Gith and her twin blue blades. They were damned good at what they did. He just watched for threats that might change the face of the battlefield.

Oh, and shot people. He did a lot of that.

He saw someone signaling to someone else and blasted the first person in the transaction. The second ducked behind a high brick façade. Ruth and Larr Gith were both in the building’s shadow.

“Wall down!” he yelled, and started toward them.

Ruth planted her feet when the thump resounded through the battlefield. Then, in a single arc, she leaped free. Wynston veered toward Larr Gith, who was busy dispatching three inept guards in the shadow of the falling wall.

She spun. She looked at him. She looked at the wall.

Sabers out to either side, she raced and headbutted him off his feet, coming to rest with her fists to either side of his head, sabers still pointed out, skirts scattered over his thighs. The bricks rumbled and roared. Some of them plummeted over her and stopped as though on an invisible shell around them.

She arched her back up toward the shell while loose strands of golden hair fell and pooled on his face. It was, for a brief, heated moment, extremely disorienting.

She smiled wide. “It’s okay,” she crooned. “You can swoon.”

“Er, what?” But the bricks above them flew off to either side and Larr Gith whirled to her feet, flourishing sabers all the way. She threw her saber at the last fleeing opponent, gave Wynston a hand up, and negligently picked the returning saber out of the air with total aplomb.

T7-01 rolled up and started spraying something chemical-smelling. Larr Gith looked down at the scorched edges of her skirt. “Oh, good catch, Teeseven.”

“Are you quite done?” said Ruth.

“Not while evil’s still afoot,” Larr Gith said cheerfully. “Is that all?”

Wynston’s earpiece crackled. “Hey. What’s your opinion on about twelve guys and three walkers? Coming in hot. Say, for the sake of argument, now.”

“That would be Theron,” said Ruth, looking to the south, where a shuttle was streaking toward them with several large shapes in pursuit.

“Can we use a gunship next time?” suggested Wynston.

“Aw,” said Larr Gith, stepping up next to him heroically. “Do we have to?”

“All right, you got this one,” conceded Wynston.

Larr Gith had the kind of smile that straight-up outshone doubts, fears, and most annoyances. “Oh, I know.”
Theron stopped short when he saw the lean Chiss leaving the war room. “Wynston. Question for you.”

He spared him a look. “No, we’re not changing the plan of attack.”

The fight over Jorgan and Kaliyo dealing with the newly discovered Spire of Zakuul was already enough of a mess. “Didn’t want to anyway. It’s about Ruth. Do you know where she is?”

“I know that she was absent during an extended argument that sorely needed her brand of leadership.” Wynston sighed and straightened. “No, I don’t know where she went.”

“Neither do I. And haven’t known, for hours. She left her holo in her room.”

“So she left for a little time apart? After the stress of that little fracas, who wouldn’t want a break?”

“A break. And when she’s stressed, or tired, or annoyed, or anything, have you ever known her to deal with it by going away from people?”

Wynston looked at him, red eyes unreadable.

“We should start by the waterfall,” he said.

It was a small search party. They didn’t want to get the Jedi involved; no one knew how they would react to a leadership vacancy. Lana stayed behind to investigate outgoing ships. Theron, Wynston, a few sentry droids that could be spared for a quiet search, left a back way from the base and into the wilderness, then split up.

Odessen was a scenic planet, which might have been nice if it weren’t midnight on uneven terrain. The trees around were reducing the starlight to a rumor being told to somebody else. Theron kept his light on his path as much as he dared, but he had to move it to scan the surroundings. “Ruth!” he yelled. How many times had she gone to meditate on the boardwalk by the waterfall? And why did she think she needed more distance now?

The answer came out of the swirling wreckage of the afternoon’s strategy session.

Theron fumbled out his holo, glancing now furtively side to side. “Wynston! Wynston?”

“Trouble?” The holo didn’t have any visual.

“Big time. People started talking about Emperor Valkorion’s knowledge of the spire and its systems? Ruth went to get that information. And she wanted to do it where I can’t see.” It wasn’t distrust. It wasn’t distrust. He wouldn’t let it be.

“She may not have been keen on the rest of us, too.”

“Beside the point. She went somewhere she thought we wouldn’t or couldn’t follow.”

“We left our Force user investigating ship manifests. If this takes Force power…”

“Then we’re out of luck. We have the droids for flying scans, anyway. If we need to bring…” Damn. Any one of the long list of trustworthy Force-users in the alliance?

“Sana-Rae,” Wynston said calmly. “We’ll ask her in the morning.”
“We’ll ask her tonight if we have to.”

“Theron…” a pause, longer than it needed to be “…never mind. We do this your way, but only because she’ll be furious if she finds out I tied your hands.”

“Fine. Great. Get back to it.” Theron pocketed his holo and cupped his hands in a horn. “Ruth!”

The night burst into clamor, but it wasn’t the one that mattered.

Two hours and several wild beasts later, Theron raised his blaster at an incoming set of crunches.

“Hold,” came Wynston’s voice. “It’s just me.”

“What are you doing? We still need to cover a lot of ground!”

Wynston strode into the space of Theron’s light. “Theron, I’m calling it. It’s actively hostile to non-combat-prodigies out here, she plainly doesn’t want to be found, and we can do a low flyover in the morning, when there’s more light.”

“She went out with him, Wynston. And she’s still out there. Alone. Without even telling me.”

“And we can’t help her.” Wynston raised a hand to touch Theron’s arm, very lightly. “One agent to another. We’ve had to bed down and sleep through worse than this.”

Had he? Did the little Chiss even feel this kind of thing? Imperial agents…weren’t like other people. “This doesn’t compare.”

“Did I ever tell you about that time her supervisor put out a galactic bounty for her death, the Emperor’s inner cult closed in as the only game in town, a Sith spy set a crack team of Jedi against her, and her husband betrayed and tried to murder her? Because she survived that. One night on a tamed planet, regardless of the voices in her head, is not going to keep her down.” Wynston frowned. “Listen. Theron.”

“What?”

“If you think I wouldn’t raze this forest in a moment if I thought it would bring her in safely, you don’t understand the nature of our association. But stumbling around in the dark will not help her. You and I will. Tomorrow.”

Theron scowled at the darkness. It didn’t budge. Somewhere out there she was alone. Somewhere out there she wanted to be.

Letting her have her way had never been this hard.

“We keep the droids searching,” he said.

“Absolutely.”

Theron tried to sleep. It ended up blurring into all the ways Ruth’s mission might have gone wrong. Why didn’t she tell him? Was it because she thought she could handle it, or she was afraid she couldn’t and didn’t want to hear his ‘I told you so’? As if he would ever say it. As if he would ever think it.

He was up at sunrise. Lana hadn’t found any evidence of Ruth flying out of the base. That left travel on foot, and he, Lana, and Wynston fanned out into the wilderness.
“Ruth!” It was a rough-edged rendition of her pleasant name. Its repetition stopped sounding like a word. It was his chant, the one that was supposed to summon her home.

And then, near a rocky ledge, he heard it. “Theron?”

The trees faded. He sprinted, jumping over logs and skidding on patches of exposed stone. Through the slapping branches he saw it: Ruth, brutally bruised, leaning heavily on a gnarled stick. “Theron,” she repeated, smiling.

“Ruth, what happened? Are you –” obviously not okay “–I mean – are you going to be okay? Why the hell didn’t you say anything?”

“I had to do this,” she said. “Though I will say I’ve come to hate spirit quests.”

He closed the distance, reaching for her. She smiled wanly and leaned against him for a few moments before returning to standing on her own power.

“What happened?” he repeated.

“Visions. The Force asserting itself, impolitely. A lightsaber of my own for once,” Ruth grimaced. “And your mother couldn’t be bothered to find me a leg splint.”

“What?”

Ruth, in all her miraculous glow, set her jaw and limped onward.

*  

Ruth felt the new lightsaber at her side. There were vision quests and there were vision quests. This one, at least, had borne fruit. Now, weary and aching, she allowed her arm over Theron’s shoulder and his arm snug around her waist. Her ordeal in the forest was over, and she and her wounded leg just wanted to rest.

Theron squeezed her while they eased down the hallway. “You going to run like this every time I tell you what I think of you?”

She giggled. “Only until I get used to it.” She looked furtively around while something in her fizzed. “I love y–” she whispered.

A dark-haired man in a black suit rounded the corner. He stopped dead when he saw them.

Ruth stopped, too. “…ou.” Her body had temporarily misplaced its notes on how to do much of anything.

“My lord,” he said in his heavy Kaasian accent. It wasn’t even words, it was an invocation she hadn’t heard in oh, so very long. The apparition bowed.

Hope tried to surge and found itself trammeled by fear. “Our son,” she said thickly. “Where is our son?”
Chapter Summary

Ruth asks Quinn where their son Rylon went, and is generally upset that he’s alive. Kaliyo blows out of town, with Wynston’s agreement. Yuun comes on board the Alliance. Jorgan mourns the dead of a Spire mission gone wrong. Ruth stops hiding something from Theron. (Quinn, Ruth, Wynston, Theron, Lana, Larr Gith, Jorgan, Kaliyo, Senya, Yuun)

The pale man’s chin came up. Weariness cast a pall over him, leaving only sharp blue eyes in a drawn face. “I had hoped he was with you.”

“No,” said Ruth. “I was trapped. I’m sorry.”

“Ah. As am I, my lord. I have no excuse.”

Theron cleared his throat.

“Malavai Quinn,” muttered Wynston behind Ruth.

She disentangled herself from Theron. “My ex-husband.”

“Who are you working for now?” said Wynston. “Have you sent out a report on Odessen’s location yet? Or are you still taking notes on who’s here that you can sell out?”

“Wynston. Don’t.”

Wynston scowled. “Who’s your commander this time? Do you need a minute to sort that out?”

“My lord,” said Quinn, cutting off the world using only his eyes, “you’re wounded.”

Much more now than a minute ago. “It’s nothing,” she said. “Quinn, I’m... busy, here. I can’t, I haven’t... I wasn’t personally looking for Rylon because there are other issues.” How pathetically inadequate that sounded. “I’m sorry. I can’t just walk away from it, not now.”

“Then let me, my lord. I still have some resources.” And, quietly, “If I found you, who is to say I can’t find him?”

Something had been pawing at her mind. She finally let it in. “I told you I never wanted to see you again.”

“I know. Forgive me.” He smiled that controlled little smile, the one she had fought for months to elicit, once upon a time. It almost made that request possible. “I could not go the rest of my life wondering whether I had had one last chance to be of service, and missed it.”

She limped forward, and he stepped aside to let her go. Slowly, the irrelevant people in the room trailed behind.
No Rylon. It was buzzing in her head. No news of Rylon.

“I think I’m done here,” she said, while the medical droid turned away. Her leg and ragged pant leg were restored to proper location. “Lana, could you please get Quinn settled somewhere temporary?” She emphasized the last word. Whatever had just happened, it hadn’t included the boy she really wanted.

“I’d better get back to ops,” said Wynston. “Ruth… be careful.”

“Always. I do learn, eventually.” He smiled thinly and walked out.

Which left her with Theron. “Do I need to give you some privacy?” he said tightly.

“Theron, it isn’t like that. Last time we saw each other he tried to kill me.”

“There’ve been stranger relationships.”

“Don’t go.” Stars knew she didn’t want to be alone tonight.

“I need to help Wynston out. I’ll see you…I don’t want to know when you come back tonight. I’ll see you.”

*

Ruth knew she had to make it quick. She gave it fifteen minutes while doubt gnawed at her. Let no one say she had rushed to him. Let no one think it.

But she did go to him. And she knocked.

Quinn opened within seconds. His uniform was still immaculate, his grooming precise, his presence exactly what she used to love, back when love was safe. That was a long time ago.

No Rylon.

He stayed perfectly still. He was staring at her cap of half-formed curls. “You changed your hair,” he said, as if that were important.

She had to smile, just a little bit, testing. “It’s been ten years, Quinn. That will happen.”

She expected to be angry. She should be angry. He had tried to kill her, then lost her son. And yet wonder was a knife’s edge she found herself balancing on. And he was trying.

He shook his head, hard. “Come in?” He stepped aside. She entered into the chamber, which was possessed of one suit hanger and a comb on the side table. The door fell closed.

“Just like you,” she said in spite of herself. “Nothing unnecessary. Nothing that doesn’t serve.” As she had, once? She pushed the thought away.

“I don’t expect to be here long. I wouldn’t, of course… My lord…?”

She took the title as her due, as she never had before. “Yes?”

“For four years I saw nothing of you, only visits to Rylon supervised by your servants. And then for the better part of six years I believed you were dead. I gave all my resources to prove myself wrong. Now that I have, I…” his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment… “what is it I should say?”
She wasn’t sure. She had a lead, though, on the one thing he had never told her. “Say you regret it? What you did to me. What you didn’t do for him.”

“They are the greatest failures of my life. I know that.”

“That’s the word,” she said. “Failure. You failed me.” The anger was old and tired, but it responded to the word. “You failed me. You failed our son. Damn it, Quinn, you failed me when I needed you, when I left the best part of my heart in your hands. When I would have died for you. You failed.”

He took each new repetition with a flinch. “For what it's worth, my lord, I will put my full faculties toward finding Rylon. I…won’t ask to stay here.”

“How long?” she said. “How long since you – since we – since he was lost?”

“Four years, seven months, twenty-six days, my lord. I…kept him with me, after you vanished. Officers can bring family on board. But he missed your estate on Dromund Kaas. I went back with him. I drank something, I don’t know what, and when I woke he was gone. No record of forced entry, no record that he…” He coughed hoarsely. “I’m sorry, my lord. If I could undo one thing in that chain, anything, I would.”

Blame still roiled in her gut. “No doubt someone wanted to use him against me. Joke’s on them, I was too busy in carbonite to be affected.”

“My lord…” his eyes flickered over her…”you don’t know what it means, to see you again. To know that something good was saved.”

“You sound like you’ve forgiven me.” Her treatment of him between his betrayal and his exile had been violent, to say the least.

He brought a pale hand up and touched her cheek. It was enough to send the tear rolling. He brushed it aside with his cool dry thumb. “I can forget,” he said softly.

She looked at him. She thought of being secure in his arms, of loving him, fiercely, recklessly. She thought of him firing at her in the midst of a blazing trap he had set. “Quinn, I can’t.”

“Ah,” he said. “The man in the red coat?”

The reminder was far more startling than it should have been. “Am I that obvious?”

“You were always obvious. That alarmed me at first. I got used to it. I hope he realizes the value of what he has.”

“He shows it. Every day.” He turned a little whiter. And that was right. Every moment with Theron was better, she reminded herself sharply, and turned away.

“My lord.” It was quick, almost desperate.

She turned back towards him. “What?”

“In all this time,” he said, “did you ever think about forgiving me?”

She hesitated. She remembered the visions Valkorion had taunted her about, not all that long ago, and remembered too well the face he hadn’t been able to see in those dreams of being shot. “Do you have any idea what it's like,” she whispered, “to be able to dream of nothing else for five
years?”

“A little closer to ten,” he said, and nodded.

She fled then.

*

When Theron finally made it back from the comfort of ops, he found Ruth sitting on the bed, staring at her hands.

She looked up. “I'm not that girl,” she said, low and quick. “I'm not that girl. I'm not that girl.”

Well, she was here. What he’d missed, he had no idea. “What girl? What’s wrong?”

“I'm not the girl who fell in love with that machine. Who was such a child, nobody left in this world but Vette and Wynston know what a child I was. I'm not that child. I have trust now. I have...oh, please say I have you.”

He was as relieved as he could be while still being furious at someone. “I'm right here, babe. And if he does this to you again I will have to ruin his day.”

“Don't. I need him to look for Rylon.”

He frowned. “If the SIS can't track him...”

“Quinn has his own resources. He always has. This job should come cheaper than others he's done.”

The bitterness was as sharp as the day he'd met her on Yavin, back when the mask hid the details of her sorrows. “You trust this man with your son?” he said.

“I have to. What else do I have?”

Was she trying to play dumb? “There's me, for starters.”

“You're needed here. Quinn can't replace you in that. The last thing I want is him making himself indispensable where the fate of the galaxy is at stake. I at least trust his self-interest enough to believe he'll bring Rylon home. He has to.”

“And if he doesn't?”

Her eyes crystallized. “Then I'll do what I do to my enemies once they're past saving.”

That hardness was part of her from before. He could have done without seeing it now...only, consider the subject. “Does he know that?”

“He'd better.”

“But did you say it?”

“Threats would be pointless.” She shook her head. “Quinn shaped everything about me. My fighting style, my tactical knowhow. The way I responded to the people I met along the way. The way I...I loved. And the way I trusted. And the way that snapped. It was all him. Yes. He knows my terms.”
She was still trembling, or close to it, still afraid of what he might say. He had to make it good. "I don’t see him when I look at you. You’re right. You’re not that child."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. The only person who’s been riding the whirlwind since you stepped out of that slab is you. No accessories required."

She got up, closed the distance quickly, and hugged him. "Some of them help."

"Babe." He hugged her tightly. If he could think of what to say he would say it. Several dumb jokes floated to mind. Only her fragile air stopped him. First, he thought, do no harm.

Do no harm.

*  

Wynston stalked past Doctor Oggurobb’s lab, walking fast to catch up to Quinn. "You," he said. "We’ve supplied your ship. You can leave any moment now."

Quinn ignored him. When Ruth emerged from the cross hallway Quinn fetched up and strode into step at her shoulder. "My lord, if you have the time."

"News?"

"Well...no."

"Wynston, did you find him a ship?"

"We serviced the one he came in on. He’s clear to leave. Any time now."

"Good." They rounded another corner. Larr Gith was walking up. Ruth didn’t notice that she was resplendent in blue and looking particularly perky.

Larr Gith slowed, running that amber-honey stare down and up. "Why, hel-lo—"

"No," said Quinn and Ruth together, and looked at each other, and hurriedly looked away.

She swept elegantly to keep up. "Wait, is he one of your boyfriends, too?"

"No," said Quinn and Ruth together, and looked at each other, and physically jerked to opposite sides of the hall. It wasn’t enough. Ruth spun on her heel to start in the opposite direction. No one moved to follow her, which meant no one had to see the look that had to be on her face.

He left then. That was the main thing.

*  

The mission to Zakuul had been a disaster. Jorgan’s vaunted squad had gotten slaughtered by the guard halfway down to the depths of a Zakuulian comms station, and Kaliyo had stepped in in a blaze of destruction.

Jorgan and his dead came on one ship. Kaliyo came on another, and landed first.

She described it all in ops to all the audience she could find: the back entrance clogged with civilian refuse, the glorious entry to the underground warren that punched and pierced so far below
the surface. She gave Jorgan a dismissive few words and continued with the good part: bombing the objective.

Senya walked out halfway through.

“And there you have it,” Kaliyo said cheerfully. “GEMINI transmitter destroyed. He’ll have to order his fleet like boring normal people do.”

“Well,” said Lana, “you did get the objective.”

“She did the job,” said Wynston. “Everyone. I need a word with her alone.” Lana pointed to the office. “Not here. We’ll catch up with you in a little while.” He caught the look on Ruth’s face and hurried his step. He turned to Kaliyo and gestured toward the exit.

“Can’t wait to get me alone?” Kaliyo purred as they walked out toward the landing pads. “You always were excited after a good roll in the fray.”

“You would prefer to be alone with me than in a room with Senya.”

“So there’s always someone bitching. Who cares? I got the job done.” She smiled. “You should’ve come with me. Kept me on good behavior.”

“Gotten killed by you in a tragic accident involving an entire building exploding. We had good times, Kaliyo. Don’t let’s pretend you would’ve let me walk away alive.”

Her silver eyes narrowed. “Oh, no, I would’ve listened to your virtuous words like always. Enforcing good behavior. Right. Just like old times.”

“Kaliyo, a long time ago I left you rather than executing you outright because I…well, I left you. I find myself in that position again.”

“That soon? I’ve been here three months.”

“That soon. Listen, Lana and Senya want to call justice down on you. And one of these days justice will find you. But not today, not if I have any say.”

“You’re a little blue for a white knight.”

“You’re a little grey for a fair maiden. Kaliyo, take a ship and go. Don’t let them find you.”

She glared at him, silver eyes sparkling. Finally she sighed. “This place was boring anyway. Trust your Sith buddy to turn a galactic insurrection into a goody-goody snoozefest.”

“I didn’t choose her for the excitement.”

“No kidding. Honestly.” She grinned. “Listen, it doesn’t have to end like this. We had some good times. I think we still could. Any chance you’d come with me?”

Yes, said parts of Wynston’s brain and body he knew better than to listen to. “That was over a long time ago,” he said.

“Right. You just keep telling yourself that.” She swayed up to him, silver eyes half lidded, black lips set in the smile he remembered every time he thought of her. She leaned in and kissed him, slowly, sensuously. Her hand on his waist was thrilling, if only because he couldn’t tell whether it carried a weapon.
Peeling his mouth away from hers physically ached, but he managed. He stepped back. “It isn’t the same.”

She bared her teeth. “Like hell.”

“Goodbye, Kaliyo.”

“Do I get to pick the ship?”

“One of those three.” He pointed. “Otherwise I will stop you.”

“Okay, so I take one. How’re you going to explain that to your overlords?”

“You stole something. No one is surprised.” Then, against his better judgment, “Everyone thinks they have you figured out.”

She returned to a cocky grin. “You count yourself there?”

“You never stopped surprising me. Now go.”

She gave a flip little salute. “So long. But when your Sith harem gets you killed, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He walked back inside and sagged against the wall. He was already regretting it. But a trial for murder or mutiny would have been such an absurdly paltry consequence for so long a career. Consequence would have to come another day, and not by his hand, not by the hands that had done so much for so long. It was better this way.

Stars, that smile…

*

The knock at the door of ops was quiet. Lana looked up anyway. A Gand in stylish green armor was waiting in the doorway.

“Can I help you?” she said.

<Name is Yuun. Yuun assists Hylo Visz with acquisitions.>

“Of course,” she said cordially. “What can I do for you?”

<Yuun was due to seek certain specialized equipment for the Alliance. But Yuun’s ship has disappeared.>

“Kaliyo,” said Lana. “If Wynston was within a half mile when that happened, so help me…”

<It was an old ship of little value. Yuun can locate it if so desired. Or fly whatever becomes available.>

“Didn’t you used to work with Major Jorgan? I’m sure you’re happy with what you’re doing, but we could take you under his command again.”

<An alien and a Republic national?>

“His description exactly, and he’s been doing us a lot of good.”
The Gand hesitated. <Yuun did not expect you to ask.>

“Are you willing to fight alongside us? Sith, Imperials, and Jedi…members of the Alliance?”

<Where Yuun’s skills are necessary, Yuun will go.>

“Come to our next briefing. I think we can give you something with a little more meat than Hylo Visz’s jobs.” For one thing, it might ease Ruth’s obsession with her own search. “Unless you like smuggling.”

Yuun nodded. <Name the time.>

*

“Major. I thought I’d find you here.”

Jorgan looked up over the row of caskets, each laid with a Republic banner. “Ma’am?”

“I’m sorry about how it happened.”

“You let that maniac in. If she hadn’t been there the rest of us could have…” Jorgan balled his fists at his hips and looked away… “I don’t know. Something.”

“But she was there. And I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t know their names.”

“I’ve got a large organization. No. I don’t know everyone’s names.” She looked at him, and realized that she had never given the difficult Cathar a chance. “Tell me.”

“What?”

“Tell me.” She walked to the casket nearest him. “Who was this?”

“Marda Osur. She was from Alderaan. She swore she’d hang up the uniform after five years in spec ops.”

“How long did she have?”

Jorgan shrugged. “A few weeks.”

“I see. And this?”

He continued the grim recitation. Ruth committed it to memory. She hadn’t bothered with these people when Jorgan brought them. Now…well.

“And that’s it,” said Jorgan. “If I’d known you cared I might’ve introduced them under better circumstances.”

“The Sith let the dead bury the dead. It’s…easier.”

“Gives you that much more time for killing, huh?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll come myself next time.”

“You want to help? Make sure there is no next time. Not for Kaliyo.”
She wasn’t sure where the menace had disappeared to after the debriefing. “I can’t just get rid of her.” Wynston would never stand for it. She did hate seeing him be wrong.

“I thought Sith got rid of underperformers all the time.”

“If I were that person, I never would have let your disavowed crew in.”

“Yeah. And these ones would still be alive.” Jorgan looked away. “Are you done?”

“You know it was a success for the war effort.”

“Yeah. At least they died for something.” He returned his attention to the caskets, clearly waiting for her to leave.

So she did.

*

Theron worked closely with Ruth all that day. She was withdrawn, preoccupied, as distant as he had ever seen her. It physically hurt.

When Ruth came in she was looking thoughtful. “Hey,” he said. “Doing okay?”

Her mouth twitched. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know it can’t be–”

She stopped him with a kiss. It was firm, insistent. Complete. She slipped a hand in his and led him to their bed. He followed. He needed to be close just then. She eased his jacket off and tossed it aside. She always liked to spend a few moments just checking the map of his chest and shoulders again. Her hands were an exercise in focus, and he followed willingly. She tugged her armored vest off, and it was good.

Then something changed. He pulled his undershirt off and got back to kissing her, but she pulled away, pushed him back down to the sheets, sat up astride, looking…troubled?

“What’s wrong?” he said, dreading. Any news at a time like this must be bad news.

She touched a fingertip to his lip, tracing along its upper edge. “There are so many strangers here,” she said. “I shouldn’t be one of them.” Then, for the first time, she rolled the hem of that thick shirt up.

The scene laid bare was dramatic. Her fair skin had puckered in a whitish latticework of scars across her torso, dominated by a saber-straight indentation from below one breast to above the opposite hip.

Her neutrality was studied now, her eyes intent. He passed a slow palm across the uneven surface, wondering that he finally had permission to do so. “Feels good to me,” he said.

She cleared her throat. “Do I seem weak now?”

“What? No! Babe, you survived every single one of these and probably ruined the other guy’s day into the bargain. That’s the opposite of weak.”

“All right.” She chewed on a word for a few moments. “Do I still seem attractive?”
Words were difficult. And the wrong one here, now, might ruin everything. Every amazing thing. He slid a hand up to take her cheek. Holding there with eyes alone he ran his hands up her sides, gently circled back down. She took a sharp breath. A first pass of palms, a second of thumbs, his whole body tensed for any rejection.

But there was none, and the first time he played his tongue to her she sighed a “yes” that told him, scars or no scars, she wasn’t going to hide again.
The Haze of the Night

Chapter Summary

Ruth sees an old friend after a heist. She encourages another heist mastermind to work with the Alliance. He decides to do so by conning Tebbith. Lana investigates an old puzzle. Tebbith asks for funding for a new project. Pierce baits Ruth re: Jorgan. Wynston and Lana use a little white lie to get access to research…sleeping happens. (Ruth, Vette, Gault, Tebbith, Theron, Wynston, Lana, Pierce, Jorgan)

“Oh,” said Vette. It was the first word Ruth had heard from her in nine years. “Look what the gundark dragged in.”

“Vette. You’re the contact Mr. Gault wanted?”

The Twi’lek laughed. “I don’t think anyone calls him Mister. Yeah, I helped out with your little funding problem. Surprised Wynston didn’t tell you.”

“So am I,” said Ruth, as the Chiss walked into the cantina.

“Ah,” said Wynston. “I thought you two might want to catch up.” He made a smooth about face and left.

Vette snickered. “Some days he’s subtle, and some days…”


“I tried out for a career as cage gladiator, but nobody took me seriously. What can you do?”

“Listen. Vette. I…”

“Don’t need the chat, thanks. I did this get-rich-quick scheme for Wynston. I didn’t know you’d be touching the operation until it was too late to back out.”

“Can I thank you for it anyway?”

Vette stared at the middle distance. “I guess.”

“Listen, I’m…I’m not the person I was. When you left, all those years ago, when you left because of what I was saying and doing and, and hurting. I’ve…I’ve gotten better.” All her justifications waited to be approved.

“Prove it,” Vette said flatly. “I guess I’m here for a while. I’ve got time.”

“Buy you a drink?”

“I’ll take a rain check.” She pulled her glass closer. “Besides, I buy my own nowadays.” She picked it up and eyed it with a certain sense of accomplishment. “See you later.”

*
“So,” said Ruth.

“Yees?” oiled the Devaronian.

Ruth pointed at the console where the piecemeal sale of their ill-gotten haul was flickering in real time. “I can’t believe that worked."

“I’ve had stranger escapades. Remind me to tell you about the Tatooine switcheroo sometime.”

“Have you talked to Hylo Visz about using a few connections to keep resources flowing?”

Gault looked shifty. “Yeah, I’ll get on that real soon.”

Ruth threw up her hands. “Have we hired anybody who doesn’t have an awkward past with upper management?”

“Hired?” Gault said brightly. “As in, you’re giving me credits?”

“Sure. When you catch up with Hylo Visz.”

Gault made a face. “You’re a very hard woman, Outlander.”

“You should see me in a bad mood.”

“Would be very glad not to.”

“Smart man.”

* 

A couple of teenagers were studying on the big scoop chairs in the reading section of the library. Tebbith couldn’t have been happier. Knowledge of the galaxy aside, it was nice to see families settling in Odessen. It was making the place a town, not a fort.

That’s when a Devaronian in a sleek beige suit sauntered in. “You, my friend,” he said at once. “I hear you’re the local curator of knowledge.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” said Tebbith. “Welcome. Please, have a seat.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He took a sofa facing away from the little reading room. “Got anything to drink?”

Around the databanks? Was he crazy? “I’m afraid not. We can go to the cantina….”

“No need, no need. Never know who’s listening in a cantina….”

“No need, no need. Never know who’s listening in a cantina. Now, my friend, I understand you’re in the prestigious position of the Jedi Council.”

“On indefinite loan, yes.”

“Spectacular, spectacular. Have you ever considered bringing some of the Jedi holocrons, say, here? Free exchange of ideas. For a modest fee I could facilitate such a scholarly transfer.”

“No,” said Theron from the doorway.

“Excuse me,” blustered the Devaronian.

“You’re excused,” said Theron. “Master Tebbith, don’t give this guy the time of day. Ask him how
many Jedi holocrons might have to be sold to offset transfer costs.”

“Mr. Shan,” said Tebbit, “that’s ridiculous.”

“He’s right! Ridiculous! Transfer costs would be in hard credits.”

Theron scowled. “Gault? Please stop taking advantage of the locals.”

“I never thought a Republic hero would be so opposed to free trade…”

“You’re still here.”

“Fine,” said Gault. He stood and held out a tiny holographic card. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Whatever he was saying,” said Theron, “it’d be ten times cheaper and probably more legal to do it yourself.”

Gault headed out. Tebbit turned to Theron. “Please,” he said, “I appreciate your motives, but I do not require a minder.”

Theron looked genuinely remorseful. “I didn’t…that’s not what I meant, Master Tebbit. Gault’s a known public menace and I know he’s trying to get his claws into business here. I just didn’t want the Jedi Council or you to have to bankroll that.”

“There was nothing wrong with his proposal.” Tebbit eyed the card, then looked back up at Theron, who was still looking annoyed. “He really wasn’t interested in the holocrons?”

“Only as far as they’re exchangeable for credits. You would be losing some in every open knowledge transfer, I guarantee it.”

Tebbit sat, glumly. “I realize it’s your efforts that spare me from having to make these assumptions about everyone we meet. I’m not completely unaware, Mr. Shan.”

“I know. And you can call me Theron.”

“Theron. Forgive me. I don’t have anything else to offer here.”

“I wasn’t actually coming here to get Gault off your back.”

“You weren’t?”

“Master Tebbit, you were a galactically recognized and respected diplomat. I don’t know why you’re avoiding that job now and honestly we don’t have time to troubleshoot. But I was wondering whether you’d be willing to come to ops as an analyst. All the information on planets we’re approaching, their governments, their military situation, the things we should be saying to them. You wouldn’t have to lift a lightsaber. Just advise.”

“Surely you have experts on that already.”

“Our top two are an Imperial and a Sith. I trust them with my life and the Alliance, but they’re pretty jaded. It’d be a help to cross reference who doesn’t make certain assumptions about everyone else in the galaxy.”

Past disasters grinned at him, the way they tended to when he thought about field work. He ignored them. “It would be my honor, Mr. – Theron.”
“Perfect. Join me for a drink?”

“I really should–” His patrons would probably find the door themselves when necessary. “Of course.”

*

“Ugh!” said Lana Beniko.

“Yes?” said the Chiss operative Wynston.

“You do realize that ‘ugh’ isn’t your name?” Lana said without looking up from her console.

“No, but where one is invoked the other usually manages to follow. What’s the matter, good lady?”

“The Yossarian report. Every time I think I’m close to cracking the code I…”

“Yossarian? Not that ten-year-old mystery file from Imperial Intelligence?”

“That’s the one. Do you know of it?”

Wynston’s eyebrows trembled. “That very much depends on what you intend to do with it.”

“We’re on the same side, Wynston.”

“Well, what have you tried?”

“The external encryption yielded a couple of names. I have people chasing those down. The file itself? Garbage. If it’s encrypted it’s not with any scheme I or Dromund Kaas or Odessen know of. I sent a message to the analyst on file as having worked on it and I can’t get a holo with him. I think he’s retired and possibly senile. SCORPIO won’t touch it. So I forwarded it to a couple of Watchers. One of them took one look and laughed his way out of the room. The other has told me nothing for weeks. I know we’re close to a breakthrough, I just know it–”

“The file is empty,” said Wynston.

“What?” said Lana.

“It was something I whipped up one afternoon to get my superiors off my back while I worked on something I found more interesting. A few bribes got ‘real analysts’ to buy in, and after that I just had to turn every loose end into a closed loop and dangle it in front of Intelligence. I’m astounded you ran across it.”

“Wynston, I have spent the better part of two weeks trying to open this damned thing.”

“Yes. It’s open. You win.”

“You are not charming,” she said icily.

“No, but I’m still fun.” He kicked back and pulled his flask from his jacket.

Lana reached out one pale hand. The flask wiggled and tugged free of Wynston’s grasp. As he stared it flew to Lana’s outstretched palm.

“You get this back if you manage to behave for a day,” Lana said crisply, tucking it under her belt.
Wynston coughed. “Um. If that’s so, you might want me to review the next few things you’re working on. You know, in case I forgot something.”

“Yes,” grated Lana, yellow-eyed and brilliant. “That would be wise.”

*

“Lord Niral!” Master Tebbith was a large Zabrak, but he could move speedily when he wanted to. He rushed up to fall into step with Ruth, who was about half his size. “Lord Niral.”

“Master Tebbith,” she said. The Jedi was a very nice man, but he religiously avoided ops and command decisions, meaning that she didn’t see much of him at all. “What can I do for you?”

“Permissions, Lord Niral. Some families have come to Odessen and brought children. There are some people gathering resources to send them to a boarding school on a neutral planet, but nobody can agree where. It would be easier if we could attract teachers here. Only a few dozen students, maybe a few hundred as the community grows. I would of course attempt to hire people who really agree with the Alliance’s overall goals. If I could get the funding for four or five teachers…?”

And assure an education for those children who still had parents. And those parents who still had children. Ruth had to wipe the sneer off her face. “Of course,” she said tiredly. “You’ll have all the resources acquired.”

Her eyes didn’t stop smarting until well after the Jedi had disappeared.

*

Ruth would swear in later days that she felt it.

She was already looking up when the queasy-looking Twi’lek poked his head in. “Ma'am?” He said. “My lord?”

Ruth raised a hand to halt the logistical discussion. “Yes?”

“It’s Major Pierce, ma'am-my lord. It’s an emergency.”

Ruth barely remembered to nod control toward Lana before racing out.

The Twi’lek was in a Republic uniform, much the worse for wear. The Alliance didn’t have its own uniform yet. That seemed like too final a step. He walked fast, eyeing her uncertainly while clearly trying not to seem to.

"Situation?" she said, as kindly as she could.

“Major Jorgan and Major Pierce, ma'am-my lord.”

“Ma'am will do. Are their guns out yet?”

“No. I left, ma'am.”

“He doesn’t mean it, then.” The room they were nearing overlooked the big bay in Odessen base. The Twi’lek started showing white all around his eyes. “Dismissed,” she said, and he snapped off a salute and bolted. One thing you could say for the Republic salute, you could execute it while sprinting. She would not mention that to her prickly ally.

Booming masculine voices fell silent when Ruth stepped in. It was a small room, for observation
rather than gatherings. The two men seemed to fill it to capacity.

One, bulky in blue armor, was the Cathar officer who had been abandoned on Zakuul by his government. Aric Jorgan, yellow-eyed, umber-furred, gruff with a hard exterior that masked a tough-as-nails interior. He burned with the kind of light the Republic said it wanted, the kind it could use if it ever decided to live up to its ideals. She also didn’t intend to mention this.

Opposite him loomed the red-rowed mountain called Major Pierce. Pierce wore his Imperial black ops uniform with pride, plus a series of decorations and borderline grisly trophies. There were grey hairs in his strict red goatee, but not many.

“Milord,” said Pierce, smiling ear to ear. “That pipsqueak shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“Major,” said Ruth, “what’s the problem?”

“Nothing,” said Pierce. “My Republic counterpart doesn’t like the way we do things here.”

Because that cooperation was…more to be desired than realistically hoped for. “Major,” Ruth said wearily. “What’s the problem?”

Jorgan saluted. “This maniac wants to lay down cover fire through an entire civilian borough.”

“Gives our boys space,” Pierce said affably.

“It’s a war crime,” growled Jorgan.

“Pierce?”

“Who cares?” said Pierce. The smile vanished. “Leave the Republic namby-pambys at home, you know I can deliver this objective with the real boys and girls.”

“This is a joint operation, Pierce. You know the rules. Anyone can take up the rank they held in their home organization here subject to my approval. And Jorgan has my approval. He’s a full partner.”

“A joint partner executing the best plans available, milord. That’s me.”

“Do it without the bombing.”

Pierce’s eyebrow twitched. He looked very, very still.

“Pierce. Do you remember when we spared a Republic squad on Nar Shaddaa so we could deploy them in an area of greater need later?”

“Can’t say I do, milord.”

“Do you remember when we cooperated with a Jedi through an entire chase on Belsavis to attain a common goal that neither of us could have achieved alone?”

“Don’t immediately recollect, milord.”

“Are you selectively forgetting every joint operation we ever ran to prove your point about how the Imperial way is better?”

“Couldn’t say, milord.”
“Do you at least remember that you have served me in a position of trust for many years and I have never broken that trust to you?”

“As you say, milord.”

Bored and frustrated Pierce was unexploded warhead Pierce. Well, he wanted theater. “Do you recall that I can keep you alive for at least nine days while sequentially force draining your every internal organ, saving the part of the brain that processes pain for last?”

“Therere.” Pierce’s grin flashed wide. “Knew I could get a rise out of the ‘Outlander.’”

“Pierce and I are old friends,” Ruth explained hastily.

Jorgan backed up a step, looking ready to fight. “I see that.”

“Take Jorgan’s recommendation,” said Ruth. “There will be situations for your touch, Pierce, and I suspect you know full well which ones are acceptable under the Alliance’s policy. Attempt to resolve future differences through General Aygo, that’s what he’s there for. Otherwise, if you’re really that bored…” Pierce kept watching with a perfect sabacc face. Jorgan appeared to have stopped breathing. “Call on me. Find me something I can fight.” She was a busy person, but Pierce had come with her a lifetime ago because she offered prestige, challenge, and a little mayhem. Now, after everything, she owed him that much.

Pierce salvaged his grin. “Milord.”

*

“The Rift Alliance fell apart after the Eternal Empire bombed Coruscant. They didn’t seem to feel that unity would offer them any protection.”

“In fact,” said Larr Gith, “some of them immediately applied for protectorate status. With the Eternal Empire.”

“The situation has changed,” Lana said crisply. “The Alliance is becoming a real power, and once we’ve talked Koth around we’ll have the nucleus of a viable fleet. These people must realize that we offer better terms than those of complete subjugation.”

Tebbith spread his hands. “I’m afraid I have no arguments but the facts, and you see what they’ve done with those.”

“Master Tebbith,” said Wynston, “they respect you. They may respect you more than they respect the shadows that lured them into this trap.”

“And if I talk them into the Alliance? And their cities get leveled with the next pass of the Eternal Fleet?”

“Which subset of planets do you not want to get that treatment?” Lana said shortly. “Because right now everyone is in equal danger of it, regardless of who signs on with us.”

“And will you stake cities on that?”

Lana looked him dead in the eye. “I have to. If you think you’re somehow outside that game, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“But you’re going to tell him loud and often,” Larr Gith stage whispered.
“Be reasonable,” grumbled Ruth. “Tebbith, we do need allies. And you have made allies. I know you don’t like consequences but consequences are happening regardless of your participation, and we need all the help we can get.”

“I will meditate on this,” said Tebbith. “I cannot make promises.”

Lana threw up her hands and turned away.

“Teb, you could be a hero,” said Larr Gith.

“Master Larr, that’s your specialty.”

Wynston looked intent. “One question for you, Master Tebbith.”

“Yes?”

“Are you at least willing to do some field work? Strictly protection. There are droids, there are enemy combatants, there are even environmental hazards that everyone here is facing every day. You’d be a powerful deterrent.”

“Please,” said Tebbith. “No.”

*

The planet was mostly grey, but the monastery on its ledge was built with vibrant colors. It was the information inside Wynston found most interesting. He stood with Lana at the front gate. The man in front of him was tall and stretched-looking. He wasn’t smiling.

“The female,” he said with a gravity that suggested he thought he was being polite, “must stay.”

Wynston could all but see Lana's hackles rising. “She is my associate,” he said.

The man shook his head. “No sorfed female will defile the monastery.”

“Only for a while,” wheedled Lana. “Would a small gift help to offset the…”

“No sorfed female!”

She brought her chin up sharply. Wynston watched, fascinated. He rarely saw her not getting her way. “I go where I-”

“What she means is,” said Wynston, “we are married but three days. Our lomscha is due.”

The stretched man painstakingly rearranged his face. “I did not realize! Come in joy! We will provide proper chambers.” He beckoned, touching the control to open the gate.

Wynston fell in behind. He might have swaggered, a little. He did love a good fight without firearms.

Lana kept pace. “What just happened?” she said in a low voice.

“I've read the fine print on this planet.” Most of his hyperspace time was spent reading. “In the lomscha, the honeymoon, newlyweds are expected to try for a child every day for three weeks. Anyone offering hospitality is expected to share the joy by providing a private place.”

Lana stared at the big dormitory they were headed towards. “You mean they think we're going
“Early and often. It got us in, didn't it?”

“You think this is funny!”

“Lana, I haven't started any scandalous rumors in ages. I feel ten years younger already.”

“Do you wish to see the library first?” said their guide.

“Yes,” squeaked Lana.

“Very good.”

*

The room they had been provided was geometric and colorful, as cheery as the rest of the monastery. It had one wide bed with exactly one pillow.

Lana shook off the first twenty things that came to mind. Most of them were physically taxing, anyway. “No.”

“I'll behave,” Wynston said negligently. He always had such control over his face, and was, as usual, so very neutral. He dropped his bag, kicked off his boots, and stretched out along one edge, pillowing his head on his arm. “Night,” he said.

Lana went to the refresher to change. Had she known she would be sharing a room she would have packed more than the long satin slip. But she did change, and crept back out in the darkness to lie down on the considerable expanse of unoccupied bed. She placed the pillow lengthwise between them as a barrier. After a moment’s consideration she burrowed under the blankets. Wynston’s breathing never left its steady beat.

She woke in the dark. Someone was in her arms, his back to her, his peaceful breathing expanding and falling slowly. Her hand was nestled against the firm muscle of his stomach.

His neck was under her nose. He smelled clean and a little spicy. He was resting, and if she could disentangle herself without waking him...

...she wasn’t sure she would. He was strange, secretive, defensive, but he felt really nice.

He sighed. She tensed. Mumbling a few incomprehensible words, he slid his hand up to trap hers, sliding long thin fingers to tangle in her own. He uncurled a little against her and sank back into silence. A long time later, she slept, too.

*

Wynston woke when someone's fingers tightened in his own. Inventory: well rested, clothed, sober, in good health; surroundings smelling like old wood, dark, strange atmosphere. Bedframe had small slats that could be snapped out as weapons, snub-nosed blaster among his things next to the bed.

Not alone.

She was wrapped around him from behind. From the limited contact of breast and leg she seemed luscious, and her arm around him was snug. Her breath warmed his neck. Idly he thought about how to wake her in the morning. A turn, a hand over her leg and torso, sliding here and barely
brushing there, up to cradle her head and kiss her. Yes, that would do nicely. Parts of him didn't want to wait that long, but in the haze of the night he didn't recall their leadup being sufficient to excuse midnight enthusiasm.

Why had he avoided this game for so long? She felt perfect. She felt like…names. Women had names. This one was…

Bloody hell. He remembered, and remembering almost jumped for it. Lana's arm stayed locked around him and he froze. This would have to be resolved in the morning. Decisively.

But he wouldn't be much of a field agent if he didn't know how to take every opportunity to fall asleep quickly under all conditions. So, trapped in her soft lazy hold and more or less resigned to it, he slept.

* 

She woke on her back. Wynston's face was planted firmly against her side, and he had an arm thrown over her belly. He was snoring, very quietly. She laughed in spite of herself. Wynston's eyes snapped open, dim even with the morning light. “Ah,” he said neutrally, and lifted away every point of contact in brisk unison. “I apologize.” He settled his eyes firmly on the floor.

“Did you wake overnight?” she said, trying not to sound serious.

“No.” He was clamping his emotions down to unreadability again. It was a technique favored by people who wanted to kill Sith. With him it was a habit. “Was I bothering you?” he said innocently, still staring at the ground.

“Not exactly.” She laughed again. “That was a little…”

“It’s already forgotten.” He sat up and reached for his boots.

She made a face and suppressed it just as quickly. “Of course,” she said. She suddenly wanted to be wearing a lot more clothes.

Of course.
Lana and Wynston react to a night together. Wynston pursues easier targets. Theron challenges Quinn’s status. Ruth and Xalek have a moment of training. Vette relaxes with her crew. Jorgan brings Ruth to meet a potential ally. Lana and Ruth have girl talk. Larr Gith learns about Voss physiology. (Lana, Wynston, Hylo Visz, Ruth, Theron, Xalek, Vette, Risha, Akaavi, Corso, Guss, Bowdaar, Trooper, Droid, Larr Gith, Sana-Rae)

The day flew by. There were archives here that Odessen could analyze for years, and Wynston sorted, filtered, and organized with a cool precision that made Lana wonder just what he had done as an Intelligence agent. He was supposed to have been a Cipher, not a…mastermind.

His hand never strayed far from his flask and, to be frank, his flask rarely strayed far from his lips. He maintained a stream of shop talk over meals. At night they returned to their joint bedroom. Lana tried not to mind the cheerful encouragements of the more worldly monks.

“I,” pronounced Wynston, “am too tipsy to talk. Good night.” He claimed a blanket from the bed and stretched out on the floor beside.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I can take the–”

“No need. Good night.” He closed his eyes.

“That can’t be comfortable.”

“You might be surprised by what I find comfortable. And what I really, really don’t.”

“Do we need to talk?”

“Told you. Tipsy. Good night.” And he shut up.

Lana, nervous, took off her boots and settled under the remaining blanket on the bed. She dreamed of things she couldn’t touch, and didn’t know why.

* 

Wynston kept his bag slung over his shoulder as he went down to the big hangar, leaving Lana behind in ops. The big hangar was mostly used as a convenience for the creative resource managers, chief among them…

“Hylo Visz,” he said cheerfully.

The Mirialan eyed him without any particular judgment. “Wynston, isn’t it?” A formality; he had been present in enough of her dealings with Ruth and Lana.

“How’s business? Nobody has stopped me from buying goods yet, so I assume your sources are operating smoothly.”
“Too smoothly. Whenever that next problem shows up, it’s going to be a doozy.”

“You know what surprises me about this operation? We've been here over a year and I still haven't bought you a drink. It's a travesty. How long are you in town?”

“I'm shipping out tomorrow.” She smirked. “Early.”

“Oh, I wouldn't want to interfere with that.” He smirked. “Much.”

“You run out of girlfriends in ops or something?”

“I was really thinking of someone normal. Ops disqualifies itself. Daily.”

“Hm. A drink might not be bad.”

“Glad to hear it. Anything I can help with here first?”

“If I need extra hands I’ll pay for them.” Visz smiled sunnily. “Let’s save you for the conversation.”

* 

Work went on. The crises of the day tottered on, usually running into each other and causing crisis explosions. Honestly, it was like trying to run the SIS, only Theron had never been crazy enough to try for that job. He already had more information than he wanted.

Ruth was in the hangar, prepping for something that Lana clearly had strong opinions about. Theron trotted over to help with the packing. Those two could debate all day if left unattended and probably would.

He leaned in over Ruth to help her stuff a roll of something into an awkwardly placed storage pod. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey.” She smiled and leaned into him. “What brings you here? I was just going low-key today.”

“Sure. I just wanted to…I mean.” His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth for a minute. “Vette told me. About Quinn.”

Shadows fell in her blue eyes. “I already told you,” she said quietly.

“Told me, what? That you were married? That he tried to kill you? Those are the only two facts you've volunteered in the year and a half we've been...doing this.” He gestured. “She told me everything about your, and I hate to use the word, courtship. And everything about how unrepentant he was after you chose to spare his life. Why are we giving this guy unlimited access to our resources?”

“Because he's going to find my son. I need you here. Stars, I need you here. And I need Quinn to find Rylon.”

“Why would you trust him with that?”

“Because I have to.” She brought up her chin. “Because I do believe he wants Rylon safe. And because that man will follow an order to a fault. I am perfectly capable of eliminating people who can give him orders until I'm the only one left in the chain.”

“You realize that's insane.”
“I do.” She sighed. “He does that to me. No. He's staying on the mission. I'm giving everything I have to this alliance, Theron, don't ask me to give him, too.”

“Aaand who really thinks he's yours to give?” No, too much. “Never mind. Let’s get you on the hyperlanes.”

“I’ll come home after,” she said, quietly.

“Good.” He grinned with a little more cheer than he felt. “I’ll keep dinner warm.”

*

“Can I help you with that?” Wynston peered around the crate the young beauty was lifting.

“I’m fine,” she huffed, and hauled it over to the hover pallet.

“How about one of the next seven?” he said innocently.

She dusted off her hands and gave him a faintly exasperated look. “Okay.”

She took another crate and transferred it, then dusted off her hands again and eyed him critically while he worked. “You’re not half as twiggy as you look.”

“Ah, just the praise I was hoping for.” He grinned. “Drink?” He offered his flask.

“Five more crates, stranger. Then we talk.”

“Works for me.” He got to work. It might be worth telling her she would have blasterproof top cover for slacking off today. But, really, he didn’t want to throw his identity around like that. Once upon a time he’d done this all the time as a nobody. It was kind of nice having that back.

*

Ruth walked into the airy Force enclave, looking for Sana-Rae. At the edge of her vision Xalek swung away from the practice dummy. His double-bladed practice sword whistled in the air as he leaped at Ruth.

She pushed him away with one hand and summoned a practice blade with the other. He would have to learn more than lightsaber work to be a real Sith. Or whatever it was she was turning him into.

“Lord,” he said, going still, his weapon perfectly poised. “How?”

She stayed on guard. It paid to do so with her arguable apprentice. “Your hands are independent. If you practice, your eyebrows, are independent. If you concentrate, two efforts in the Force may be independent.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I don’t have eyebrows,” said Xalek.

“So,” said Ruth, mentally kicking their respective differences once more, “you’ll have to skip to the Force practice.”

*
“All right. Who’s up for Nar Shaddaa?”

Risha draped herself over one of the comfy lounge chairs in the Nunnya’s holo room. “Vette.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I’m not past the statute of limitations,” Guss said glumly. “One little priceless gem…”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love the takeout,” said Corso. “But are we ever going to get to see this Odessen place?”

“Subtlety,” groaned Akaavi, and glared.

“We don’t have to see Odessen,” said Bowdaar. He paused. “Even if it would be interesting.”

Vette hugged herself. “If we go there, you have to meet Ruth. And if you meet Ruth, I have to explain…a lot.”

Risha checked her nails, then, more obviously, Vette’s expression. “She freed you, she went berserk, you dumped her in favor of nice scoundrels like us. What’s to explain?”

“We could have her over for pazaak,” said Corso. “Unless she’s too important for pazaak. Is the Outlander too important for pazaak?”

Vette laughed in spite of herself. “She was always horrible at pazaak. Not as bad as sabacc, but pretty close.”

“So her, us, and cards, huh?” said Risha. “Sounds like a match made in moneymaking heaven.”

“Look, I’m trying to get less involved here…”

“Why?” said Akaavi.

“Manaan?” said Vette. “If Nar Shaddaa is a bust? Maybe?”

* 

“Ma’am.” Jorgan stalked into ops and gave a curt nod to the surrounding advisors. “Got a lead you might be interested in. An old CO. She wants to talk about the Alliance and the Republic.”

“You trust her?”

Jorgan glared. “Yes, ma’am.”

“All right. Set up the meeting.”

He paused as if surprised. “Thanks.”

At Jorgan’s request they brought Yuun, too. The destination was a forested planet in the Core, a long journey but one made tolerable by some cautious conversation, about the great task and about Odessen. Ruth imagined toward the end that Jorgan was hardly glaring at all.

They landed in a clearing surrounded by tall, dark forest. Another ship, a Republic model painted with some garish two-headed mascot, was already there. Ruth came down the ramp behind Jorgan, at Yuun’s side.
The other ship cracked and sighed. A ramp came down and a short, stocky woman in full Republic armor walked out, followed by a taller armored woman, and a six-foot-high tripod robot decked out in patriotic colors.

The first woman took off her helmet and set it aside at the base of the ramp. Then she looked at Ruth. She was Rattataki, round-faced, with silver skin and rounded black markings and probably more piercings than were strictly regulation. Her lips were black and full, like Kaliyo’s, Ruth thought, though her relative inexperience with Rattataki might just mean she thought they all looked the same.

“The gang’s all here,” she said in a wide-ranging soprano. “Dorne, Forex…this is Ruth Niral. The Emperor’s Wrath.”

“I don’t use that title,” Ruth said warily.

“Oh,” she said, grey eyes sullen, “can you make the rest of her go away with a snap of your fingers, too? I’d love to see that.”

“Jorgan, would you be so kind as to introduce us?”

“Ma’-” Jorgan got halfway through, saw the Rattataki’s face, and stopped. “Lord Niral.” She looked no happier with the title than she had with the deference. “This is Major Fadreleth.”

“Fade,” said the Rattataki, with a cocky wave. “This is Captain Elara Dorne. And my good friend M1-4X.”

“Under the circumstances,” said M1-4X, “I cannot exchange pleasantries. Though I am under orders to postpone wiping your stain from the face of the galaxy until after some conversation. Do keep me updated, Major.”

Jorgan rolled his eyes. “Vik?”

Fade made a little ‘o’ of her lips and shook her head. It occurred to Ruth to check for Yuun. He was standing behind her, silently. Ruth directed her awareness to the lightsaber at one hip, then the other. They were there.

Jorgan held still. “Fade wanted to talk–”

“Oh, let me,” Fade said sharply. “There’s been a change of script.”

“Sir?” the still-helmeted woman said. She didn’t put a Republic ‘r’ at the end of that word.

“Emperor’s Wrath. Outlander? No, that’s not for you and me. Emperor’s Wrath. Once upon a time there was a spec ops squad. Let’s call them, just for shits and giggles, Ranger Squad. Ring any bells?”

“No,” said Ruth.

“No. I didn’t expect it to.” She put up her hands and started toward Ruth. M1-4X was moving in impressive silence. “Did you ever meet a man,” said Fade, “my species, about five foot eleven, spotted marks like mine? Did you know he was in Ranger Squad?”

“If he was a soldier, I didn’t see his face.”

“He had a chipped front tooth. He rebelled by never piercing his nose.” Fade was still advancing.
“And when he was twenty-three years old, he was assigned to protect the chancellor of no-name border world. You wouldn’t remember it, either. But there was a complication. A Sith Lord on that planet. Not just any Sith Lord. The biggest, meanest one of all. She was there for trade concessions. And they tell me that entire battle took eight minutes, and when it was done, my brother was dead. Along with all of his teammates. They died defending *trade concessions* and you took those anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you? Sorry? Does that superior Sith brain feel remorse? Or are you just saying that because I outnumber you five to one right now?”

Few people held her to account for her actions as a faithful and hard-hearted Wrath. It wasn’t exactly an easy subject to broach. “The numbers have nothing to do with it. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You are sorry for *nothing*, Wrath.”

“Do you want me to apologize for what I’ve been and what I’ve done in service of the Empire? Because I won’t, any more than you would apologize to me for serving the Republic. This is war. But I am sorry it took someone from you.”

“Nerf shit. Nerf shit! My family came to the Republic to keep from getting squashed by monsters like you! And you killed him anyway! And now-”

The tall woman was yelling. “You said-”

Jorgan was gripping his assault cannon.

“Now,” said Fade, slinging something with a rapid underhand throw, “you’re killing nobody.”

The item impacted on Ruth’s chest and stuck. Jorgan was yelling something. Ruth clawed and closed a Force focus around the item. When it exploded it slammed her three meters back into her own ship, but at least she still had her face.

She drew her sabers. Yuun and Jorgan were on the ramp, weapons out but not active. “Is this your idea of talking now?” Jorgan barked.

“Sir!” repeated the armored woman, aiming but not firing.

Fade was scrambling to her feet. “Fire, Forex! Just kill her!” The droid skittered into better position and opened fire with a hefty blaster cannon atop its chassis. Ruth deflected it, stepping down now to reduce the amount of blaster fire going into her ship. She deflected another…

…and twisted, knowing she didn’t have enough time to stop three directions. The rapid-fire blue bolts came roaring out of the woods, followed by a tall and faintly familiar Weequay.

“Yee-haw!” yelled Fade, and pulled something else from her utility belt while her main hand directed a blaster pistol, not exactly with finesse.

“Ma’am, fall back,” barked Jorgan. “We can’t--”

The tall woman pulled out a second blaster. And she walked up behind Fade, and let loose one rounded burst of stun fire. Fade dropped like a sack of ordnance. Tanno Vik stopped his fire.
The tall woman leaned over, plucked the detonator out of Fade’s limp hand, and deactivated it.

“Forex,” yelled Jorgan. “Stand down.”

“Captain!” shouted the droid, shooting. “Explain!”

“I will,” called the tall woman. “Stand down.”

The droid creaked but complied.

Vik cocked one hip. “Okay, who’s next?”

“I’m sorry,” said the tall woman, Dorne. She pulled off her helmet to reveal a short blonde ponytail and big blue eyes. And a definite Imperial accent. “Outlander. Jorgan. Yuun. It’s…good to see you.” Ruth assumed that part skipped her, and didn’t mind. Still, in the interest of peace, she deactivated her sabers.

“When Fade called me,” said Jorgan, “she said she wanted to talk about a truth and reconciliation commission for the Alliance. Something to deal with some of the bad blood between Outlander and Republic.”

Dorne nodded. “She’s come a long way, Jorgan. I was convinced.”

“Convinced enough to go AWOL?”

Dorne looked forward rather than down. “I had some leave stored up. The desk job has not been challenging enough to require many vacations. Though…Personnel Division doesn’t know I’m here.”

Ruth cleared her throat. “So, Jorgan, your CO decided that an ambush in the forest would be an ideal introduction, and you agreed?”

“Heh.” Jorgan frowned. “For a long time, when Fade said jump, I said how high. And jumped too just in case my first guess was correct. I figured she wanted someplace she could think.”

“She was never a city person,” Dorne said quietly.

“In the interest of clarification,” the droid said loudly, “are we or are we not blotting this Sith scum out of existence?”

“We’re not,” said Dorne. “Not unless she takes her lightsabers out again.”

“I fail to see how incapacitating the Major is in the interest of the Republic,” the droid said dubiously.

“This is bigger than a Republic objective,” said Jorgan. “Believe me.”

“The major said you might be ensnared by the feeble lies of the Alliance’s fiendish Sith overlords.”

“The major said many things,” said Dorne. “And all of it was to get close enough to kill the – Outlander?” Ruth nodded acceptance. “I’d better get her home before she…”

“No,” said Jorgan. “Let us take her. Show her, show everyone, the Alliance. This is what I came to when Special Forces left me out to dry. I’m an actual part of it now. You should see.”

“Except me,” said Tanno Vik. “My gang’s probably electing a replacement leader as we speak, and
I love interrupting elections.”

“Yuun?” said Ruth. “Any comments?”

<She came a long way,> said Yuun. <Yuun fears that what she was headed towards has changed without her knowing. Fade will not forgive.>

“Ahem,” said the droid.

“Forex?” said Dorne.

“When do you think the dastardly Sith will resume hostilities?” Some ion charger inside him whined. It seemed to request discharge.

“We’re not, shooting, the Outlander,” said Jorgan. “Dorne, listen to me. They’re doing good work here. Maybe Fade can’t be part of that while this is still…”

“A trifling six years fresh?”

“Maybe she can’t be part of it ever. But you and me? We’re soldiers wherever the cause needs us to be.”

Dorne looked at Ruth for only an instant before returning to Jorgan. “And where is that, Captain?”

“Stopping the Eternal Empire. And getting back while there’s still a Republic to get back to.”

“You’ll get that,” Ruth promised.

“Dorne. The Republic took you out of Havoc Squad, put you and a lot of good people on desk jobs, and got steamrolled by an Empire they weren’t ready for. Go back if you want to. But I could use you here. We. Could use you here. You have my word, it’s not like the Empire where we’re going.”

Dorne looked down. “She needs me. I have tried so hard to bring her back. Maybe now that she’s gotten an answer she will come.”

“You think she’ll be happy about that answer? It’s never going to happen. The Outlander’s the best-defended woman in two Empires and that’s before her friends show up.” He did not comment on whether that included him. “This was her shot, and I’m not sorry she missed it.” Jorgan cast a sidelong look toward Ruth’s feet. “At least you know now.”

<Outlander?> said Yuun.

Ruth turned. “Yes?”

<M1-4X’s path may change here. It was used for Major Fade’s purposes, but that need not always be its fate.>

“I will support Major Fadreleth’s crusade against the monsters of the Empire and the Sith for as long as she can use my superbly engineered durasteel expertise!”

<Yuun can change that,> said Yuun.

“Hm,” said Jorgan. “It’s probably better than leaving him in her hands right now.”

Dorne’s lips parted, but she didn’t say anything.
“How much adjustment will he require?” Ruth said skeptically.

<An updated directive. New logic pathways to accommodate a joint effort. It is not difficult.> said Yuun.

“And I would want to…?”

“Because he’s the toughest guy ever to join Havoc Squad,” said Jorgan. “He’ll work with me.”

<Yuun recommends this course of action.>

She looked at the droid. The droid’s shiny orange eyes glared back, searching, she knew, for a flaw. “It’s blatantly robbing the Republic. Something, you should note, I haven’t done yet.”

“It’s robbing a person who stopped caring about the Republic a long time ago,” Dorne said tiredly. “I wouldn’t mind bringing him back, but Jorgan, if you really think he’ll do better for you than he would sitting in an inventory closet on Coruscant while the Senate fights over him…I do in fact have a DCD-1740 property transfer form that could be adapted, pending a formal agreement with the Alliance.” She fixed her eyes on Ruth. “If that’s in process? with cleared personnel I see no reason not to initiate the transfer early.”

Ruth nodded. “I can work on it.”

“This door stays open for you,” said Jorgan.

“I believe you. Thank you. But I can’t come with you.” She knelt and lifted the limp Fade over her shoulder. “Safe travels, Jorgan. Yuun. Vik, I…”

“I’ll assume safe travels anyway,” Vik said sunnily. “Watch your back, Dorne. You’re gonna need to when she wakes up.”

Elara did not share his cheer. “Forex, look after those two. Is that understood?”

“Completely, Captain! I would be delighted to aid them in their return to the glorious cause of the Republic! Speaking of which, are we grinding the Sith into the fresh soil of another liberated planet yet?”

<Come with Yuun.> said Yuun. <For an upgrade.>

*

<Outlander. M1-4X is ready for service.> Yuun gestured. Ruth and Jorgan both followed.

M1-4X stood in the cargo bay, looking rapidly around. “Are you certain we’re going to our next assignment?” he said dubiously. “Perhaps we are going undercover to the rotten heart of the Empire!”

“An Empire,” said Ruth.

“Excellent! The cause of freedom will not be denied! For the elktzz!”

Ruth stared.

<This Gand was in a hurry.> Yuun said contritely. <The Gand word for Alliance was recorded.>

“We can fix that, right?”
“Stay away from my circuits, Outlander! I have reason to believe I’ve been tampered with by nefarious Imperial sympathizers!”

“Yuun. By Yuun. You remember him?”

“Processing,” M1-4X said sullenly. “I’ll deal with you in a minute.”

* 

“I’m only going to ask this once,” said Lana.

Ruth looked up from the navicomputer. “Oh?”

“I’m an adult. You’re an adult. He’s an adult. Word of mouth is not how these situations get resolved.”

“That wasn’t a question, Lana.”

“Wynston. What is he looking for? You’ve known him longer than anyone here, and what’s more he respects you for it. So…what’s the missing piece? How is it he trusts you and no one else?”

“He doesn’t trust me the way he used to.”

“I was under the impression you were involved. Briefly.”

“Yes, about a week. It was nice. We didn’t really get to know one another until after I’d cut him off for my own pursuits.”

“For Quinn.”

Ruth hesitated. It sounded like a mistake. “Yes.”

“And yet you, unlike any number of other women, stayed connected to him.”

“The Force dragged us back. I’m not sure he liked that.” Ruth studied Lana, who looked intently back. “He likes you, Lana. He admires you, and not just for your physical assets. I think you’d be good for him, if he ever let anybody in again.”

“Do you think that’ll ever happen?”

“I hope it will. Platonically he’s one in a trillion. Romantically, well…nobody’s studied in more detail than he has. I’m sorry I don’t have any advice for you, Lana. – Actually, I do.”

“Oh?”

Ruth smiled, and stopped herself, and smiled again, shyly. “When you get there? Hold him down.”

* 

It was late. The lights in the Force enclave had dimmed, and everyone had filed out, except for Larr Gith and Sana-Rae. The Human eyed the Voss and the Voss sat straight-backed and serene.

“So if I understand this,” said Larr Gith, “your visions have to run through an Interpreter to be official. That’s how Mystics work, right?”

“That’s correct. Visions have…ambiguities. The meaning may not match the surface image.”
“Then why didn’t they send an Interpreter with you?”

“It was said that I would go alone.”

“Permanently?”

Sana-Rae took an interest in the floor. “I have a role here. My visions serve.”

“Have you gotten any vacation time? Back to the homeworld?”

“It is not necessary.”

Larr Gith processed that, looking over the bands and whorls of the Voss’s patterned skin. “Does that mean you don’t have someone waiting for you?”

“I do not understand. Waiting for what?”

Larr Gith leaned over and kissed her, lightly, not for too long, and was gratified that at least Sana-Rae kissed her back, however briefly.

Sana-Rae backed up and touched her mouth. “Ah. You do not understand.”

“Explain it to me.”

“Voss bond for life. A Voss’s passions are suppressed until marriage. The Rite of Ardor on their wedding night is their first awakening.”

Larr Gith boggled. “Wait, really? You’ve never…with anyone?”

“I attend to prophecy first. Regardless of its path.”

“So this would be a big deal for you.”

“Yes.”

“I mean, among offworlders this entire time, and you never wanted to…?”

“Want does not mean for me what it does for you.” Sana-Rae studied her in turn. “One of our people married an offworlder, years ago. He walked with her in ritual, completed the Rite of Ardor. Then he left.” She pressed her lips together, frowning. “It took no Mystic to predict.”

“And what happened to her?”

“She lives as those whose husbands fight with the distant commandos do. Her voice is heard at the meets. She receives the crowns in the autumn and the flowers in the spring.” Sana-Rae’s voice dropped. “I think she awaits the day a Mystic breaks her bond. But this is not to be.”

“All that because of one night?”

“Does fate require any more time than that, to change a life?”

“When you say she’s waiting for a Mystic. Can Mystics…choose? I mean, a general subject area, a specific person, can they push their talents that way?”

“No.”

“Hm. Good.” Larr Gith stood. “I need to go. Look, I didn’t mean to threaten your…”
“I know.” The smile would have melted even a much harder heart than Larr Gith’s. “Goodnight.”
Chapter Summary


M1-4X gave an expansive wave to the alarmed-looking magistrate. “Given only an hour or two in the fray, myself and the dastardly Sith will liberate this settlement!”

Ruth made a face. “Forex…”

“What?”

“We’re on the same side. Can you speak a sentence about me without the words dastardly, nefarious, or villainous?”

The droid’s eyes flickered orange, as if hectically calculating. “How about depraved?” He seemed immediately to notice her lack of acceptance. “You must understand, while I maintain the utmost respect mingled with healthy skepticism for your motivations, my cutting-edge programming forces me to speak only the truth about enemies of the clkktzz.”

“I am your ally,” Ruth repeated. Again. “Now call me a Sith. Without embellishment.”

M1-4X backed up as if readying a running start. “You are a… a Ssss…” he bobbed…”you are…a seditious fiend! Sith.”

“We’ll work on this.” Ruth turned to the glassy-eyed magistrate. “We’re here to help.”

“Are you sure?” he said.

M1-4X whirred. “Of course! All citizens of the clkktzz are to be kept safe from the depredations of the…uh…”

“Oh, say it,” snapped Ruth. “I dare you.”

“Eternal Empire,” he amended peevishly.

“And don’t you forget it.”

*  

[SCORPIO hatches a plan to capture GEMINI Prime, the heart of the droids that control the Eternal Fleet. Mandalorians, led by Shae Vizla and aided by Torian Cadera, are contracted to take the factory. A plan is devised to take a single Eternal Fleet vessel and override the captain’s protocols.]

*
“Wrath. I heard about the siegebreaker at Donovan Prime.”

“Oh,” said Ruth. She had gotten many reactions to her history. Admiration was usually not one of them. “The Mandalorians don’t keep a newsletter or anything, do they?”

Torian laughed. “Maybe we should start.”

Nope. Wrong. Exactly wrong. Ruth looked at the young man’s marked face and thought, he doesn’t know any better.

“Got any ideas on how to take those walkers?” said Theron. “Get me close enough and I can jam their controls. After that Ruth might be able to–”

“I can.”

Theron nodded. “Though if you’ve got experience slicing the things, that might make walkers number two through twenty go faster.”

“Slicing? I picked up a few things here and there.” Torian grinned. “We’ll have that those walkers dancing ballet before you know it.”

“Is that usually what you do with enemy walkers?” Ruth said nervously.

“Well, usually we blow them up after.”

“Understood. Let’s go.”

*

Wynston leaned over the analyst’s shoulder. “Simple. Hit this icon – no, the one below it. Left.” He laughed and brushed his hand over her wrist. “There.”

“Got it,” she said, not withdrawing. “What next?”

“Well, for the basic scan you…”

“Wynston.” Lana’s voice was a knife. “We need to talk.”

“The rest of it’s nearly self-explanatory,” Wynston said in a considerably brisker tone of voice. “I’ll check in tomorrow, see that you’ve got it.” He straightened, consciously fighting the tension in his back and neck, and followed Lana into the office.

“It’s four in the morning,” he said, professionally, ready to face disaster. “What happened?”

Lana’s yellow eyes sparked. They were beautiful when they did that. “Are you really going to go through every woman in this settlement just to prove a point?”

Not a good start. “I'm not ‘going through’ them and if I were trying to prove a point I would be much, much less discreet about it.”

“It was in ops!”

“It was four in the morning! Who was going to care?” He had avoided the cantina after Hylo Visz. He had done everything right. Damnably enough, the woman he was trying to avoid was a spymaster.
“Ever since what happened you’ve been desperate to spend time with anyone but me. What was so disturbing? And what possessed you to start punishing me for it?”

“This is nothing to do with you.”

“Don’t insult my intelligence. This has everything to do with me. With you and me.”

“Anybody-and-me can only happen with people I don’t work with.”

“Is that your problem? Getting involved on the job? I thought you didn’t mind that.”

“I was an idiot not to mind. Do you not recall what happened the last time?”

“I don’t understand anything about your behavior last time. But I’m insulted that you think I could be anything like Kaliyo.”

“The person, no. The situation, yes. I don’t usually dwell on these things but perhaps you deserve to know.” Perhaps it would calm her down, somehow. He folded his hands behind his back, dropped his chin, and considered. “Imagine…someone thrown in with you by forces you couldn’t fight if you tried. Close quarters. For months. Imagine she’s beautiful. Imagine everything she does is a test, personal, professional, philosophical, so you can’t take your eyes off her for a moment.

“Imagine she knows the game, knows every twist and turn, but you can still figure out how to surprise her. Imagine her laughter is the most intoxicating substance in the galaxy.

“Imagine the most dangerous person you know, held within arm’s reach for time beyond endurance. And imagine that it is to your advantage to give in.”

Somehow, for causes he couldn’t immediately recall, they were standing very close. He looked upward at her. ‘Imagine,” he said softly, “that all it will cost you is your soul.”

Lana didn’t back down. Instead she pitched her voice low between them. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“I disagree. It can’t happen again. When I make decisions based on my emotions, people die.”

She scowled. “So you make your decisions based on who’ll sleep with you? That can’t possibly be worse.”

His hand itched for his flask and he knew it would only make things worse. “They mean something to me. I’m sorry if that doesn’t fit your preconceptions. They mean something, but they don’t have the man who rides out to save the galaxy five days a week. They’ll never have that. You do. Do you have any idea how few people have had that person? Don’t ask me to blur those lines.” And then he ran out of breath. He held completely, completely still, knowing what was coming and feeling too conflicted to fight it.

She kissed him. She was live in the strike of contact, hungry. She fanned her fingers through his hair, musing like she belonged there, like their one idiotically chaste night hadn’t been a fluke after all. She touched his waist. He set a hand on her hip, spreading slowly. He kissed her like they hadn’t been together for a thousand years.

Well, they hadn’t been.

And the conflict boiled over. He jerked free. “Are you out of your buggering mind?” he said. “We can’t do this.”
She smiled, and her eyes were beautiful whether he noticed it or not. “I thought we had a promising start.”

“Not the point! I have to be ready to stop you, if it ever goes bad. And you me. There was a time I would have done that and taken the side benefits, too. Not anymore.”

He was addressing her lips, and thought maybe he should stop. She kissed him. This time she touched his neck, brushing with the backs of her fingers. He ran a hand up her side and around to her tensed back. She picked at his uniform jacket until something came loose, then pushed it around to run her hands up and lean against the feverish muscle of his torso. He played his hands around her belt, mapping in detail.

No. No. Disbelieving, he had to rehearse it ten or fifteen times in his head before he could make his mouth say it. “No.”

She made a small noise that might have been questioning, asking to clarify his word to something better fitting the vanishing space between them.

“Stop this,” he said hoarsely, and kissed her, hard, out of the vague idea that force might mean separation. He shied away from her tongue but his hands gripped her sides tight. He pulled his head away and immediately set about kissing her cheek, her jaw. “No,” he whispered in her ear. It was all he could manage.

She pressed her whole body to his and he couldn’t suppress a gasp. “Why are you screaming yes?” she whispered.

He groaned and shoved their bodies apart, looking at her collar instead of at her. “Because I always tell you what you want to hear,” he growled. “But I can’t this time.”

And then it was over. Her smile broke. Her hands fell to her sides and he let them go. “You are a beautiful, intelligent, self-aware, charismatic, and fierce woman,” he said. “I admire you more than I know how to express. But I can’t give you what you want.” His lips trembled for just a second. “Not so soon after the last catastrophe.”

“You think anything about me would be like her?”

“I think I can’t find out. I have limits, Lana. I’m sorry you have to see that.”

She looked at him the way she looked at people who had just knowingly screwed up. “Don’t be sorry. Be honest. With yourself, as well as me.”

“I just was.” He stepped away, leaving a cold void. He turned to the nearest console as if he had some intention of using it. “Goodnight.”

She nodded like she knew the moment for persuasion was gone. There was a puzzlement he couldn’t stand to look at in her face. “So whose bed do I need to pull you out of the next time there’s an issue?”

He would not retreat that far. “I’ll keep you apprised,” he said coolly.

She wilted. “I see. Goodnight, Wynston.” And, with that confident step, a little faster than usual, she left. He wondered whether she had seen just how tired he was.

He gave her thirty seconds’ head start, then returned to the main room and turned his eyes to the console. It blurred. His blood was demanding something he couldn’t give it.
Because, he had, a job.

One did not get involved with long-term Sith colleagues who happened to show a personal side. Especially when she might end up on the wrong side of the cause later. Basic rule of operation in the Empire. He’d scorned men who flouted that one. He’d thought himself above it: bed them? Yes. Develop feelings? No.

He had almost had a normal life here. Staying in one place made it dangerous to keep more than one liaison, and he had put a lot of thought into managing that here. And then the going got tough, he could go back to HQ and lose himself in work again.

*Dammit, Lana.*

She was a brilliant partner. Not just her lips, her warm smooth skin, the commanding firmness of her hold. She appreciated the breadth of his resourcefulness, all the tricks a Force-blind could use to come out ahead in a mercilessly Force-sensitive galaxy. And stars knew she was great with the Force work. They complemented one another. They looked out for their friends together. They…

…had been building up to this for quite some time, hadn’t they? He should have stopped it. It was his job to notice connections and disrupt them where necessary. He should have seen this.

The thought of her hands on his waist set his heart racing again. What did she see, that piercingly sensitive savant, when she touched him? Did she feel the fire she had called forth in his veins? When he’d kissed her again, and again, in spite of himself, in the desperate need to know her, allowing himself one burning hopeless millisecond after the other before he had to stop…

He gritted his teeth and glared at the console. No reports in in the last ten minutes. Daylight spoiled a thousand half-worlds out there, but none of them were reporting to the Alliance at the moment. Blast it. He wanted answers. He wanted something on his hands that wasn’t quite so…

physical.

Odessen had been good to him. He had to admit that. Ever since Ruth’s rescue he had been settling in here, happy to have a cause and friends to share it with. It had been a long time now. Maybe those roots were in need of cutting.

Except…Odessen needed him. The alliance couldn’t spare someone of Wynston’s capability and asking them to would be nothing short of malicious. Besides, staying wasn’t so bad. He had worked longer than this for Imperial Intelligence. He had no problem that wouldn’t be fixed on taking traveling jobs for a while.

Just not with her. Not with her lips so demanding, her fingertips trailing flares across him, his jacket falling…falling open…

He refastened his jacket. In the watery reflection of a nearby console he restored order to his hair.

Lana was always so controlled. He had admired that about her. Now that he’d seen the edge where that slipped he didn’t know what to think. Why should she be interested, anyway? He wasn’t the man he’d been back when he did this sort of thing habitually. She probably didn’t want that man, anyway. And she’d be crazy to want the man he was now. He could pretend for her, longer and better than anyone she’d ever known, but the thought of sustaining it made him deadly tired.

And yet…to play it real? He couldn’t un-feel what had just happened. All this time he had taken such pride in showing her aspects of his training, his capabilities; it wasn’t such a far-fetched continuation. He wanted to kiss her breath away again. He wanted to pleasure her by slow degrees
until she forgot that any world had ever existed outside the boundaries of their mingled limbs. As it was...he had reality to contend with. What could he possibly say to her in the morning? Words. Cold words. There was no other choice.

His body throbbed, and duty held him by the throat. That was just as well. For both of them.

*

Lana walked fast. She usually did. This just seemed like an occasion to go faster.

It couldn’t purge the resistance from her hands. The immediacy, the scent of him…

If she turned back, he would be there. Serious for her, unsmiling. Smoldering. Perhaps ready to lash out again. Would he? Wouldn’t he? She didn’t know. Why had she been so blind to this side of him?

She reached her room. It was sparsely furnished and decorated to her simple taste. She had several mementoes of Dromund Kaas that had stayed with her through all the dark places she had walked. They looked good in the light.

Damage control was called for. She had never thought someone as stable as Wynston would need it, but it was obvious now. She rehearsed the cold words. We...no, I said some things. I regret. No. Ill-advised. Better. I said, did, some things that were ill-advised. No, no, let me continue, I have to finish this. (continue, let me – no. What an incredibly vast word.) It was a mistake. I won’t let you happen again. It. Won’t let it. The words were thorns in her mouth.

She changed her clothes. It took away the pressure of his arms around her tunic, but the skin of leg against leg left her more distracted than before.

She washed up and went to lie down.

She had heard about his casual attractions to other women but this was his first direct admission of desire. It was...not what she had expected. It was staggering. She hadn’t let herself think about him that way before. They were coworkers, of course, and what they did together was too valuable to risk by doing other things together. It was that Rattataki who had changed things, who had cracked open the door Wynston had kept shut all this time.

Stroll through, blow things up, leave. Kaliyo’s preferred modus operandi.

Lana didn’t realize she’d been tracing the path of Wynston’s hands until she reached the cold sheets at her side. That searing recollection was going to make sleeping difficult.

Wynston removed difficulties. She knew he identified with that. But he was out there, not here, and the persuasion of his body lay in direct opposition to the professions of his voice. She had encountered his need and he had denied it. Had she really asked so much? Yes, she thought. So very much yes. Another vast word, yes. She craved more of it.

He had never, in all their association, made a demand that would unbalance their operations. Now that he had she could feel nothing else.

She didn’t sleep just yet. She couldn’t. Even at this distance the catch in his breath took hers away. And she needed to breathe.

*
Senya was studying the console by the big projector when Ruth walked in. For a moment, Ruth forgot her errand.

“You’re singing,” she said, amused.

“Yes,” Senya said matter-of-factly. “It helps me concentrate. Rote memorization was never my strong point.” She squinted at the console again.

“What were you singing?”

“An old tune. I wrote words for it, but it wasn’t real music.”

“How so? Er, how not so?”

“It’s silly,” Senya said distinctly.

“So? Some of the best songs are.”

Senya looked her over, visibly fighting a grin. “I don’t see it.”

“My father collected folk songs. Some in languages I don’t even speak. There was one, about a woman who went to the stars and the man who tried to join her. He got into increasingly ridiculous scrapes on the way.”

“I’ll believe it when I hear it.”

Ruth looked around. Ops was silent but for two analysts doing inscrutable analyst things in the corner.

“Is this too difficult for the Outlander?”

“I don’t have an artistic bone in my body,” said Ruth. “It’s going to sound terrible.”

“Let me be the judge.”

Ruth muttered the first line. But once there, she had to forge a melody down to the punchline. And with that established, the chorus followed close after. Ruth trailed to a stop after. “And so on,” she said, and laughed.

“You have a good voice. You should consider sharing.”

“And convince the steering committee I’m crazier than I already am?”

“If everyone’s singing, no one is crazy. Have you tried Wynston?”

“Ha! Have you?”

“You’re the one he listens to.” Senya turned back to the console, trailing one hand along the edge. “So what was verse two?”

* 

Wynston leaned against the wall and let his blaster hand fall. “Are you all right?” he said, struggling to keep his breathing even.

“I’m fine,” said Lana, and Ruth signaled agreement. “What about your shoulder?”
“Hardly anything. Let’s get on board.”

They covered the bare distance to the ship without further harassment. Wynston and Ruth took the controls to get out to orbit and thence to the safety of hyperspace.

“Do you think it made a difference?” said Lana.

“Of course it made a difference. That little army has been under the thumb of the Sith for their whole existence. A chance at freedom? They’ll work with us for that.”

“I’m glad you were there for the Force-blind touch,” said Lana.

“It was rather nice getting someone to believe me without blasters.”

Ruth cleared her throat. “I’m going to go re-center.” She headed through the door to the cargo compartment.

Wynston, carefully, said nothing.

“We can probably take the rest of the day off,” Lana said, too breezily. “What are you thinking for food?”

“We haven’t had Tionese in at least eight hours. Agreed?”

“You could change the order if you want.”

“And throw you off your game? I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The silence went on just a few moments too long.

“I should really…” said Wynston.

“Keep the controls. I’m going to check on Ruth.”

Moments later Ruth emerged from the back. Lana disappeared.

“What’s going on?” said Wynston.

“She’s avoiding you,” said Ruth. “Or hadn’t you noticed?”

“No. I mean what’s going on with you and her and me.”

“Are you still…?” she said.

“Am I still what?”

Ruth made a face. “Pushing her away.”

“We’re at equilibrium.”

“You have no idea what she looks like when one is trying to meditate twelve feet away. It’s not at equilibrium.” She tilted her head. “I don’t understand what part of her you’re not crazy about.”

“Are you sure you’re not in love with her?”

“Oh, very. She’s not exactly my…I mean…” She cleared her throat. “Of course not. Is this still about Kaliyo?”
“Bloody hell, Ruth. You’re not supposed to notice that.”

“Oh.” She grinned. “Give Lana a chance. Believe me. I know about past regrets. But loving someone isn’t the same the second time around. At all. It gets better.”

“You trust too much. That was your problem.”

“But you trust me.” She grinned. “Will it help if I say I’ll let you run her through with my lightsabers if it goes wrong?”

“Bizarrely, no, it doesn’t.” Wynston grinned back. “Let me handle this, Ruth. In my own time.”

“As long as ‘handle’ isn’t code for ‘not doing anything, forever.’”

“You’re a cynical woman.”

“I don’t like it when my friends put off their happiness.”

“If you insist. Who am I to argue?”

*

“Lord,” said Xalek. “When will I take the field with you?”

“Soon,” said Ruth. “I have been facing extraordinarily difficult fights. I want to bring you on something less dangerous.”

“The Dark Side is present in all battles. What else matters?”

Her apprentice, her opposite. Why he listened to her she would never know, but she was glad, in a strange way, that he did.

“Has Sana-Rae not given you exercises outside the Dark Side?”

“She tries. I see no point.”

“You could have chosen a more fitting master than me.”

“No, lord.” Xalek bowed. “I would serve no lesser power.”

“Soon,” said Ruth. “You never know what you’re capable of until you test yourself.”

“Lord.” He sounded happy about it. Ruth left him alone.

*

Larr Gith considered wrapping the alien up with a bow, but decided it would be too annoying wheeling or levitating him all the way through the base.

So she led him into the Force enclave.

Sana-Rae was standing in front of five young people, preteens-ish, demonstrating some kind of glowy Force manipulation. She always did make those look good. Larr Gith waited until the students dispersed.

Sana-Rae made a beeline for Larr Gith and her guest. “Master Larr,” she said. “And…?”
The Voss Larr Gith had brought bowed. “My name is Ru-Baden,” he said. “I am an Interpreter. The Three sent me.”

“I convinced the Three to send him,” purred Larr Gith. “They’re really very reasonable after a two-hour speech to soften them up.”

“Offworld tactics,” Ru-Baden said philosophically.

“I have seen their results first hand,” said Sana-Rae.

“So now you’ll know what all the ambiguous stuff means,” said Larr Gith. “And you won’t be the only Voss here. Everybody wins, assuming Mr. Ru here doesn’t mind the food and lodgings.” And in an aside, “It’s not much but the more lobbyists we get the better chances of a cafeteria upgrade.”

Sana-Rae was staring at her. After a truly awkward silence she stepped forward, touched Larr Gith’s chin, and planted a kiss on her mouth, warm and clinging. Seconds later she pulled away.

“So we’re clear?” said Larr Gith. “I did this for you, but we’re not getting married.”

Sana-Rae smiled and bowed. “I understand.” It was the Jedi kind of bow, the sort that said about half a million things and didn’t bother expressing any of them. Not Larr Gith’s favorite word in the interspecies dictionary, but hey, she’d just done something good for the universe. Truly it was reward enough.
A Breath: End of Book 2 and Interlude

Chapter Summary

SCORPIO shakes nerves, particularly Wynston’s. He resolves something with Lana. The Alliance gathers to battle Arcann and Vaylin. After the battle we break for a series of glimpses from the past: Koth’s escape, Wynston’s escape, Theron’s more or less escape, Fade’s time with her crew, and Scythia’s treatment of Xalek. (T7-01, SCORPIO, Wynston, Lana, Tebbith, Koth, Larr Gith, Ruth, Senya, Tebbith, Calline, Theron, Fade, Scythia, Xalek)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[SCORPIO reveals the location of Odessen to Arcann, who attacks. Koth returns with the Gravestone and prepares to destroy Arcann’s flagship. A boarding party lands on the ship, where SCORPIO takes possession of the Eternal Fleet. The Alliance champions barely escape with their lives.]

T7-01 was running in circles, beeping to himself. It sounded pretty vicious.

The mute model of SCORPIO was on the main holo. Wynston was staring at it. So was Lana.

“I’m sorry,” said Wynston.

“What for?”

“I should have smashed her into scrap.”

“Ah.” She shrugged a little. “I should have had her removed from storage.”

“I thought we could still get some use out of her.”

“Me too.”

“How is it I’m always echoing you before you’ve said a word?”

“We have a lot in common, Wynston. We live in the same place, fighting the same battles, with the same people, with…some of the same history. It’s all very…convenient, from a certain point of view.”

“Are we talking about this again?”

“I’m afraid so. When we were out there it really looked like we might never get to reopen the topic.”

“I’ve been trying to deter you. That includes the mortal peril.”
“Sorry to report it hasn’t been working.”

“Do you still think…?”

She nodded.

T7-01 made a long siren kind of noise and returned to an agitated figure eight.

Well… Lana was right. Twisting his courage as tight as it would go, he walked around the table to where she stood. “I’ve been thirty-five years in this wretched mess of stars and never met a woman like you.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“It’s not often I mean it.” He dropped his voice further. And checked to see that everyone else in ops had earpieces to pay attention to. “Believe it or not, I want you.”

Laina raised her eyebrows and it almost distracted him from the quirk of her mouth. “Are you ‘out of your buggering mind’?”

“Most likely. Is that a dealbreaker?”

Lana half smiled. “Far from it.”

“Can we adjourn somewhere? I need to pleasure you until you’ve forgotten how to speak.”

“I don’t know, I’m pretty articulate.”

“Try me.”

They left T7-01 to his own devices.

*  

Koth looked around ops. “Nice to be back,” he said. “I think.”

“Welcome back,” said Tebbith. “We have work enough for ten of you.”

Larr Gith grinned. “And that’s just the professional side.” Tebbith and Koth stared. “What?”

“Kaliyo’s out,” said Ruth. “Decisively. I think you’ll find our other recruits more palatable.”

“And that’s just the professional side,” stage-whispered Larr Gith.

“Do you mind?” said Ruth.

“Nope. Admit it, he’s cute.” Tebbith was starting to turn a genuine shade of green. “Okay, so we had a briefing or something?”

*  

“Wynston’s assessment of SCORPIO’s capabilities was… worrisome,” said Senya.

“I know,” said Ruth. “But he’s not wrong. SCORPIO knows. It isn’t in her to withhold knowledge if she thinks sharing it will make her look better. If she’s talking to Arcann? It’s only a matter of time before she turns us in.” Ruth squeezed her eyes shut. “It’s coming.”
“I know,” said Senya.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Stop him.” Senya gave Ruth a hard-eyed look. “There is nothing more to be said.”

A premonition still flicked at the back of Ruth’s mind. “Maybe one more thing,” she said. “I…kept your poems.”

Senya half smiled. “Read them to your son. When this is all over.”

“You really believe I’ll find him?”

“There are some things we have to believe, evidence or not.” Senya nodded. “You showed me that.”

* 

Wynston hated being out of breath, but he had to admit, sometimes it was the only reaction.

He untwisted things just enough to get his head on the pillow. Lana rested her chin on his shoulder.

He raised his hands and turned them to and fro. Livid marks were showing on his wrists.

Lana saw it, too. “Did I hurt you?” she said, sounding horrified.

“Yes,” he said. “Does that bother you?”

“Of course it—” She eyed him, her every lovely feature suspicious. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“No. To be honest until just now I wasn’t sure you knew how to lose control.”

“I could say the same of you.”

He frowned at her. He kissed her red mouth, tousled her yellow hair, touched his blue nose to her white. “Do you think we might do this again?”

“What, now?”

“If you want. I can find something to do until I’m up to speed.”

“Are you…serious?”

“It’d be a few minutes. I’m not as young as I used to be. You may be shocked to hear this but I never exaggerate my physical capabilities.”

“I noticed.”

“Are you happy?”

“Wynston. Yes.”

He relaxed. “That’s what matters.”

“You always have to be the one running this, don’t you. You start the illusion, you push it along, you convince her she’s irresistible – the whole experience. A one-man show sustained for hours. Or days.”
“Illusion?” He shook his head and settled his arms more comfortably around her. Her body was still giving off waves of heat. “When you and I are here, no other woman exists. Or has existed.”

“But if the woman who is here wants to pry your hands off the controls…”

“She’ll find I enjoy it. Does that bother you?”

She smiled and kissed his finely defined collarbone, then his lips. It fit. “No.”

*

“Lord Beniko,” Tebbith looked wide-eyed and pale. “Word from Theron, and a few supporting details from my contacts. You’ll want to see this.”

Lana, spurred by his tone, looked over his shoulder. “Oh. Yes, yes, I will.”

It took only minutes to gather the main players and apprise them of the new situation.

“This is it,” concluded Lana Beniko, leaning back from the projector. “Master Tebbith has sent messages out; Scythia’s task force will arrive within hours to support us. If we reach this we reach Arcann. And this war will be over.”

The door to the conference room opened. Looking neither left nor right, Malavai Quinn stalked to his former wife’s side. “My lord,” he said, his voice low but piercing in the silence of the room. “I believe I have Rylon’s whereabouts.”

Ruth turned at once. “Show me.”

And, like a bad dream, she started for the door.

“Ruth,” said Lana, twisting to follow with a disapproving eye.

“You have this under control,” Ruth said coolly, and passed, leaving the assembly behind.

“Ruth!” snapped Wynston; as she didn’t seem about to slow down he followed her and Quinn out into the hallway.

“Ruth, there’s a war on,” he called.

“You can handle it,” she called back.

“You think anyone in this entire operation can face Vaylin with a lightsaber? Much less Arcann.”

“If they’re there when I get back I’ll deal with them.”

“Ruth! Have you lost your mind?”

“No!” She spun on her heel, hard-eyed and close-fisted. Quinn shadowed her in silence, his face set. “Am I getting a breath of air? For the first time since I woke up in this hellscape? From the one person who has been trying to secure it for me, who has given me a single whisper of hope? Yes. This is my son, Wynston. The rest of you will have to wait.”

“You’re throwing every ally you have away when we’re facing the battle of a lifetime.”

“Every ally I have can handle this. You can handle this.” She started walking again.
His hand reached the flask in his jacket and, at an effort, dropped. “And have you ever stopped to think what I am without you?”

She frowned. She had rescued him from unfortunate circumstances, but they were only circumstances.” You’re perfectly capable. You’re unstoppable. Don’t you know that?”

“I can’t meet a lightsaber, Ruth, with anything other than my wits. The brain to which those wits belong wouldn’t do well after the first swing.”

“You have Lana. Don’t you trust her?”

“With my life. With my fortunes. And, sometimes, with what passes for my heart. With the galaxy, though? That’s your department.”

“And I will deal with it as soon as I can. You have the Jedi, too, don’t forget. They’re eager to prove their heroism. My ship, Quinn?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Wynston shifted his scowling focus. “Captain, have you ever done anything that wasn’t directly against your lord’s best interest?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Quinn said stiffly. “You rarely do.”

“You’re sabotaging the only war that matters!”

“To save the only person. My lord will return for your cause when we are finished. But she does not serve you. And neither do I.”

“Wynston, go,” said Ruth. Then she staggered, raising her hands to her head, and stopped for a moment. “Shut up,” she seethed. “Wynston, I promise you. I’ll be back.”

“Yes, but I might not be waiting for you. Dammit, Ruth. This may be our only chance.”

Ruth’s stride slowed for a few seconds. She looked at the floor in Wynston’s general direction. “So take it. I’ll be back when my son is safe.”

“If Theron were here-”

“I would tell him the same thing. That’s all.”

He gritted his teeth. He peeled away.

Ruth stopped in the high arch leading to the landing pads. “Wynston,” she said, her voice ringing like cold iron. She turned her head in profile, eye gleaming. “If you move one muscle toward sabotaging my takeoff I will kill you, and then I will go save my son.”

“You’ve never threatened me before,” Wynston said slowly.

“I’ve never had to.” Her jaw tightened. “And believe me. Without you I think this war will truly be lost.”

Wynston made himself change direction. He hated to think that there was nothing more he could do, but sometimes irrationality couldn’t be forced. Sometimes some people couldn’t be forced. And he had an operation to coordinate, his biggest one yet.
Senya goes to keep Vaylin from interfering. The Alliance is forced to battle Arcann, only to be separated by falling debris. Senya abducts Arcann, hoping to redeem him. Vaylin escapes. SCORPIO grants free will to the GEMINI captains of the Eternal Fleet, and takes her place at Vaylin’s side. The outcome for the Alliance...is yet to come.

End of Book 2: Summons

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Interlude 2. Flashbacks 2

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5 BTC

“Hey, bot’uhn. I was starting to think you wouldn’t wake up.”

“I’m moving, hsin’bo,” grumbled seven-year-old Calline from the refresher doorway. Her big brother flashed her his thousand-watt grin and trotted back to the boys’ bedroom. Calline trudged out to the kitchen where her big sister Caevral, neat in her maid’s uniform, was busy preparing lunch.

Caevral smiled. She smiled any time there wasn’t a disaster actively in progress. “Morning, sleepyhead. You get enough rest?”

“Yeah. Doing great!” Calline yawned. She had stayed up reading about heroic bounty hunters under the blankets, which Caevral almost certainly knew, but they knew better than to make a big deal of it with Pippa or Mimma around. “Ready and raring to go.” She’d picked up that Basic phrase from a holovid she had watched just a few days ago.

Mimma was still sleeping; Pippa was scanning the morning’s headlines on a console popup from the counter. He nodded silent greeting and went on reading. Big brother reemerged from his room carrying a heavy canvas messenger bag covered in stickers of exotic things and places. He put a hand in to raise one freshly patched-up corner for Calline’s examination. “One good-as-new-bag, on the condition that you don’t let wild animals chew on it this time.”

“There weren’t any wild animals, hsin’bo.”

“No, but that’s what you say to make it look good.” He smiled crookedly and turned away.

Pippa was just collapsing the holoscreen back into the counter. He stood and fixed hsin’bo with a heavy stare. “You’ll make it to work on time this afternoon?” he said in Cheunh.

The adolescent looked straight across to address his father’s chin. “Yes, Father.” Also in Cheunh. It might have been a neutral check-in once, but it hadn’t been for a long time. Lately at least Calline knew it had something to do with one of the women at her brother’s after-school job. The details were too weird to think about.
But Pippa had turned away and her *hsin’bo* recovered his smile. “Thank you for lunch,” he told Caevarl, palming one of the neatly wrapped packages from the counter and tucking it into his already well-stuffed bag. Then suddenly he went up on his toes and hugged her, whispering something in her ear.

Whatever it was, she pulled away glowing. “Well, thank you,” she said.

He beamed back at her. Then he turned to Calline. “Ready to go?”

“Ready when you are, slowpoke.” She stuck out her tongue.

The road to school was narrow but peaceful. She chattered as she usually did while they walked, telling him about the Basic novel she’d been reading; he followed along, throwing in the occasional encouraging remark. He didn’t even make fun of her enthusiasm for glamorous spacefaring lifestyles. Mostly he liked to listen, which worked out nicely for her.

He stopped at an intersection. “Oh. It occurs to me I forgot to pick up the magnet dust I’ll need at work tonight. I’ll run down to Jaco’s and get that now. You go on ahead.”

“Don’t be late,” she said.

“Hey, I already promised once.” And with that he hugged her, tighter than he ever did, and in her ear he whispered “Love you. Don’t ever forget how great you are.”

“Hey,” she said, bouncing back from the contact, a little confused, a little flattered. “Thanks.”

He grinned. “Rock that astrography test today.”

“Planning on it.”

She didn’t see him at school, which wasn’t too surprising; his year studied one building over. She didn’t see him on the way home, which was expected; he had work down at the factory. She didn’t see him over supper, which was all right, but she also didn’t see him when he was due home after his shift.

Caevarl noticed, too. Mimma and Pippa were still out when she emerged from the girls’ room some time after supper, looking worried. “Have you seen–”

“No,” said Calline from her armchair, “has he called?”

“No. Is he in his room?”

“Just Cerruel and Cruosol there.”

Caevarl went anyway to check. Calline closed behind her shoulder as they stepped in, picking their way over Cruosol’s block fortress, and stepped up on the frame to peer at the highest bunk.

It had five little stacks on it, neatly arranged. At a glance it seemed to be everything *hsin’bo* could call his own. The pile at the end was small, just a couple of action figures and a glassed-in holodisplay of a Chiss ice cat tamer. The next one was mostly just folded clothes and a couple of other toys, better suited to Cerruel than Cruosol. The one after that had a couple of datacards that Calline recognized as favorite holovids, along with his datapad, the one he should have carried to
school, the one three times better than the household runner-up that Calline used. The one after that
was a little sewing kit and a colorful scarf. At the end was an assortment of household things,
nothing a child would want, though their parents might get some use out of it.

“He should have taken this to school,” Calline said, still staring at the datapad. Her mouth seemed
to move very slowly.

“Callie,” Caevarl said, biting her lip. “Step away.”

Calline remembered something. “What did he say to you this morning?”

“He said ‘love you.’” Caevarl wasn’t smiling.

Calline met her sister’s eyes. The meaning piling up with those neat stacks on the bed was
something she couldn’t look at straight on, not until she did something first. “We have to find him.”

But they never did.

*

11 ATC

The Knights of Zakuul were never far behind. The Eternal Empire had superb information, even in
the corners of Wild Space nobody wanted to go to. Koth and his crew, one of the few Human-
staffed ships in the Eternal Fleet, had to execute fancy footwork just to earn a few hours’ rest here
and there.

Tynet looked up from the console. “No one in sight. I think that last slingshot helped. Let’s take a
few hours off.”

Koth checked the readouts over her shoulder – no Eternal ships in the entire sector. “Great,” he
said. “I have an idea or two.”

“Captain,” she purred. “You’re taking advantage of our glimpse of safety.”

“Damn right I am.”

“I, uh, think I heard something belowdecks,” said Vaint. He tossed off an informal salute and got
out of there.

“Look, we don’t even have to go anywhere.” Tynet looped her arms around Koth’s neck and
smiled, green eyes sparkling. “How’s that for R&R?”

“What’s the hurry, sweetheart?” He gave his demurral the lie by kissing her ear, her neck. “Two
plus hours may mean an actual bed.”

The console beeped.

“Don’t get that,” he muttered against her sweet mouth.

She stiffened, but she kissed him back. They took a step, a stumble, a hot lean...and the console
flickered on.

The voice that spoke back was metallic. Artificial. GEMINI. “Zeroing in on the deserters’ location
now.”
She shuddered head to toe. “Coordinates away,” she said. “Koth, it’s too late. Just go with them peacefully.”

Koth shook his head, hard. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry, but they said I could go home…”

“There are no homes in Arcann’s Eternal Empire,” said Koth. “Only prisons. I thought you knew that.”

“I’m sorry.”

Koth stalked out toward the ramp. Tynet followed. “Listen,” she said hurriedly, “they’ll only put you in prison, I made them promise—”

“A promise from them is worth nothing!” Koth bit his cheek until he was sure he could get another full sentence out without faltering. “You’re leaving through that door. If you want to do so while we’re on the ground, I suggest you get a move on.”

One more jump. One more flight. One more night alone. It was all getting to be routine by now.

*

11 ATC

“Hold on, Dorne.”

Elara Dorne looked across the room to her Cathar squadmate. “Yes?”

“I’m pretty sure we can do this in two-part harmony.”

“Vik,” said Dorne,

“that—”

“goes—”

“against—”

“every—”

“regulation—”

“we have—”

“in the book.”

“Nice,” said Vik. “You two should do it while juggling flaming torches back and forth. The kids’ll love it.”

M1-4X clanked cheerfully. “Such a display would be a fine morale booster for children everywhere! Can we arrange a live holofeed?”

“No,” said Captain Fadreleth. “Let’s face it, nobody would believe that face.”

Jorgan rolled his eyes. Fade grinned.
[Nevertheless, Vik’s scheme for equipment caches in friendly civilian areas holds merit,] said Yuun.

“Yes, if we want to get busted for militarizing noncombatant zones,” said Jorgan. “The answer’s no. Captain?”

“No,” said Fade. “I like you all too much to get put on trial for war crimes with you.”

Vik rolled his eyes. “Too little, you mean. Real friends face the tribunal together.”

Fade laughed. “See, you’re a scary and problematic man, but it means something to me that I don’t even feel like kicking your ass—”

The holo beeped. Everyone looked over at the big projector. Fade answered. “Yes?”

It was a man in full dress uniform. He was holding something edged with black in his hand. “Captain Fadreleth?”

“That’s me,” she said while her world spun around her. It was edged with black. “Where’s Dekker? Where’s my little brother?”

“I’m sorry, Captain. There was a Sith raid on the Chancellor’s complex where he was guarding…”

How many people can point to one ten-second sequence in their lives and say, “That’s it. That’s where it all went wrong.”? Fade could. From that day and every day after.

*

14 ATC

“But why?” said Theron. It wasn’t the correct question to ask, he was just supposed to hear “it’s over” and accept it and walk away not knowing what he’d done wrong.

That was correct.

“It’s not you,” said the beautiful black-haired heartbreaker he just called Lyn. “Honest. It’s been lovely, Theron. But I need more than a five percent timeshare, and Varmith…he’s offering that.”

“He left you once. I come back.”

“Please. Don’t make this hard. You’re very sweet. We can still keep in touch.”

What, so she could dump her next guy for him? Part of him admitted he wouldn’t mind that. But that wasn’t what she was offering. “I get it,” he said. He wished there were more to pack up out of this relationship, but there really wasn’t. Even his toothbrush was still in a jacket pocket.

He’d always been temporary.

“I’ll get out of your way,” he said. He had work to do. Being in love was one hundred percent incompatible with that. Especially with someone who apparently wasn’t even looking at him. No woman could ever understand what it was he did and why. Except coworkers, and none of them had ever commanded his attention the way Lyn did. “Best wishes, Lyn. Really.”

“I knew you’d understand,” she cooed. He got out of there before he could say any of the ideas that bubbled up in response.
“Lord. I request permission to go to Ilum to bury my father’s bones.”

“Denied,” said Darth Scythia without looking up.

“Lord. If I do not do this, he will never become a god.”

“Intriguing. No.”

“Must I remain chained?”

Scythia stood. She glided toward Xalek and looked up into his yellow eyes, the only part of his face not covered by his bone mask. “Do you hate me?” she whispered.

“Lord,” he grumbled.

“Do you want what you cannot have, all because of me?”

“Lord.”

Will that hate make you stronger than a fool of a god ever would be?”

“Lord, my father’s honor—”

“—is nothing to a Sith. Remember that. The Dark Side will never serve superstition when it can feast on rage.” She smiled. “Now get back to work, slave.”

The Force would free. That was in her code, too. Sooner or later, someone would let him fight.

Chapter End Notes

The divisions and separations in this chapter are setting up for reunions and rediscoveries down the line...
Quinn and Ruth flew in silence for a while. Their chairs faced in the same direction, which at least spared them eye contact.

“How far?” she said, staring out the viewport at hyperspace’s inscrutable rush.

“It’s Republic space,” said Quinn. “Eight hours ten minutes to the station where we’ll exchange this ship for something less distinctive. After that, ten hours fourteen minutes to the planet.” He didn’t have to refer to the navicomputer for the figures.

“How has he? Is he safe?”

“Only physically. He was…seized, by a Jedi. The Jedi changed his name. They took him to—”

“No.”

“To Tython, my lord.”

Her stomach twisted into an unbearable knot. “My baby? On Tython?”

“No for much longer.”

Ruth’s head was swimming. Tython was a Jedi lair. It had never been anything for her but enemies. “How long since…he was taken?” It had been while she slept in carbonite. She never had a chance. “Close to six years now, right? He would be nine.”

“Five years, nine months,” said Quinn. “One week, three days.” Quietly, “You see I am full of numbers.”

She wasn’t his friend, not really, not anymore, but she hated the bitterness there. “All the ones I need,” she said gently.

“You know how deeply I regret allowing him to be kidnapped.”

“It was out of your control. I know you did everything you could after.”

“No. I didn’t. I split my time looking for you.”

“Ah.” She had never thought about it that way before. But of course when she disappeared from the galactic stage…of course he had looked. Even when someone more vulnerable was missing. “I was a liability.”

“No! You were the only thing—” He coughed and caught himself. “You were the only thing I could hope for if I could not save him.”
“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have been more useful after I came back. I was too busy with…” she waved a tired hand to encompass the alliance and all its labors… “this.”

“You are exactly what you need to be. To me, to our son. My lord. And to every ingrate we just left behind.” He glared steadily outward. “Thank you for choosing this.”

“I have to. For him…and you. After leaving you the way I did.”

“You left the way you did because of me.”

“We can keep blaming ourselves for the next eighteen hours, but it won’t make us any more battle ready.”

“Ah.” A silence a little too long, yet not cold. “I had little to do but formulate apologies for a long time.”

“Quinn?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Are you all right?”

She wished she could see his face better. “Closer, now. I will be. We only have to do this one thing more.”

“Closer,” she agreed. It was good enough.

They waited a while longer. Ruth realized that she was picking at her nails to the exclusion of everything else. She blinked hard and looked up.

Quinn wasn’t quite looking at her. Not quite. But he must have noticed the change. “I will leave after this,” he said. “I will await your word. I think Rylon’s arrangements are rightly left to you.”

She thought of the alliance she had left behind, the same one she would return to after this. The only home she had left. She could use a fighter, so much more a loyal one. And hadn’t Quinn proved his loyalty for these past months, running free of the alliance she was tied to to investigate wherever he had to? Sure, she had said she never wanted to see him again after the matter of Baras, but that was before her imprisonment. Hadn’t he worked to save their son all that time, and then while she was busy trying to save everyone else? How many had so binding a purpose? And of those how many were competent? “You don’t have to go,” she said.

He slipped into the drawl of a man reaching a foregone conclusion. “And who would they put on my welcoming committee, my lord? The Imperial agent? Or the Re-pub-lic one?”

“Don’t. They can’t be jealous of something that doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I believe the engines are making noise,” Quinn said crisply, and stood, stone-faced, and adjusted his jacket, and walked out, leaving Ruth to wonder where there really was still a “too far” she could go to. Somehow, after everything, she hadn’t expected there to be.

* 

They changed her ship for a small but speedy rented one at ruinous cost on the edge of Republic space. The borrowed vessel was jarring but Quinn took control and wasn’t wholly disappointed with its condition and capabilities. He returned them to hyperspace. Ruth – the Outlander – Lord
Niral – the Wrath – the woman sat in the navigator’s seat, not looking at him. Maybe she was thinking of the battle they were leaving behind. Then again, maybe not. Maybe she was thinking that she trusted him for this. And then again, maybe not.

“My lord,” he said diffidently, “he may not answer to his name.”

“What? Why not?”

“The Jedi call him Shevan,” he said, emphasizing the second syllable. “One more tie to cut.” And he felt her anger even if he couldn’t see it. “If we land close enough to their younglings we may not have to fight our way through.”

“We’re not fighting,” she said without looking at him. “I bought a robe while you were negotiating the ship. I’m just Master…Ruth and Niral won’t be safe. I’ll be Master Quinn.”

“My lord…will they truly not know?” He had calculated the odds of fighting through. They weren’t good. But he wasn’t sure he trusted the alternative. Ruth Niral was many things, but “infiltrator” wasn’t on the list.

“No Jedi who ever felt my Force presence up close survived to tell anyone else,” said Ruth. “I wore a mask in my public life. And I’m not the Dark Side devotee I was. With a hood up I can blend. And I could have any reason to have you anonymously at my side. An attaché. I’m sure important Jedi have them.”

“As you wish.”

She finally twisted. Her eyes were that frank pale blue he had never in all his travels forgotten. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“Never.”

“Good.” She dropped her gaze. “If it comes to fighting, take him and run. I’ll buy you time to get him safe.”

That was unacceptable, and if she knew him the way…well, the way she had never known him, she would have realized that. “Yes, my lord,” he said anyway, because that was what one did when she gave orders.

If it came to fighting, he would die before surrendering his wife and son to the Jedi.

When they exited hyperspace Quinn found himself near an orbital station over a lush green world, not visibly scarred from the war. Traffic control contacted him at once and he said he had a Jedi visitor, and requested direction to the Temple. He was not challenged further. Idiots, these Jedi. They had no idea how to protect what they had.

Ah, but if his son was held in similarly lax security…

Ruth walked out and came back in in a shapeless brown robe with a deep hood and a muddle of uninspired embroidery on the edges. She took in his look and smiled, surprisingly softly. “How do I look?” she said, and plainly meant to make it sound ironic and disinterested.

Her short hair curled around her temples. Her waist was cinched to one lean band of muscle, one he remembered well. “Very plain,” he lied. “I wouldn’t give you a second look, my lord.”

She smiled. “My lord? You’re going to have to either cut that out or not talk.”
“Of course, Mas-Mast-” He cleared his throat, trying to rid it of the rising vile taste. “Of course, Master Jedi,” he managed.

“Mm. Yes. Maybe not talk.” But she smiled.

He landed on one of a little archipelago of pads and fell in where he had always belonged: just behind Ruth’s right shoulder, ready to offer a supporting word, a supporting blaster, or both. At last, at last, for the first time in so long. He knew the length of her step. He knew the cadence. And as he walked he always knew which member of this anthill to fire at first, if it came to that.

There was a well-beaten path along a ridge that led up toward a great rounded building that had to be the Jedi Temple. Once, Imperial invaders had made it into that temple. Quinn only regretted that they had been unable to finish the job. True, the Republic and Empire were supposedly united against the common threat; but that would not always be the case. Time after time the Empire had been leashed away from the right fight. Not forever. Now Ruth and Quinn entered the building and Quinn looked around with interest. Everything was in muted earth tones, built with an insipidity for the ages. Everyone here looked busy, but not tense. It was as if they never expected an attack again. Here he saw a soft underbelly exposed, and his hand itched for a knife.

Ruth accosted one of the robed passersby and spoke with a strange cheerful innocuousness. “Excuse me, I’m looking for one of the younglings, a nine-year-old. Do you know where he might be?” She listened to the instructions and nodded. “Thank you.”

Their path took them through the curving corridors of the Temple, down a grand staircase, and out to a front yard that stretched out to wilderness on three sides. Ruth kept her hood up and her head down. Prickling now with the awareness of a hundred enemies in sight, Quinn followed Ruth closely while they took a path to the north toward a well-tended meadow where two dozen children were going through some sort of slow martial forms under the eye of a towering Nautolan. Quinn scanned their faces, desperate, hoping. But before he could see anything Ruth turned on her heel and raised a hand. “Turn around,” she whispered. “Turn around and hold still.”

He tried to look over her shoulder. “My lord?”

Ruth hiccupped or sobbed. “He looks just like you. Anyone can see it. I’ll be right back.”

Everything in him screamed to keep walking, to find his son, his son, one of only two goals he had had for the last five years; to find him once more, whole and safe and his. But he obeyed. He couldn’t be patient, but he could be disciplined. She walked away, out of his presence, out of earshot, and he waited, scanning the wilderness, ready to burn it if anything went wrong. Was she bluffing? Was she convincing? Couldn’t he help? Or would his face betray them both?

Ten thousand years later he heard the scuff of boots. He turned to see Ruth resting a hand on the shoulder of a fair-skinned black-haired boy that could have been his twin thirty or more years ago. The boy peered up at him with dark blue eyes, maybe darker than they had been when the boy was four years old. Quinn had never seen mother and child together. The image pierced him to the heart.

The boy frowned. “Who are you?” he said, staring. But it was the confusion of struggling recognition, not the one of having no idea. He was just asking confirmation of what he already knew.

“We’ll have time to talk,” said Ruth. “Come with me.”

“Master Moic doesn’t know you,” he said, but he started walking.
“I don’t come to Tython very often,” she said. “Have you ever been off planet?” Quinn didn’t think the boy falsely named Shevan realized the tension in that question.

“I wasn’t born here,” said the boy. “I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“History is something to be proud of,” said Ruth. And they entered the Temple. Quinn paced ahead of Ruth now, scanning every cross path and glaring at every passing Jedi. And then, in one long narrow hall, he stopped dead. Several crossways down, Satele Shan slowed to a stop.

Quinn brought his hand to the blaster in his jacket. Ruth, however, didn’t move for her weapon. Instead she stopped, her hand firmly on Rylon’s back.

“You knew,” said Ruth, her command voiced hardened to a blade. “You monster. You knew.”

Satele looked around as if to seek witnesses. Or avoid them. “There wasn’t time, Ruth.”

“Right. Timing.” Quinn felt the tide of emotion even if Ruth wasn’t letting it loose. She sneered. “Like right now. Don’t you have a fight to get to?”

“Don’t you?”

“I am exactly where I need to be, Master Satele. And you and I are done.”

“He needed stability.”

“He needed his mother!”

“I couldn’t give him that! You were gone! The Jedi Council didn’t choose to bring him to Tython but when my brothers brought him the only thing to do was welcome him. Shelter him. Teach him. And then, with the Alliance, there was never a good time. You needed your focus.”

“I needed my child. We’re not all admirably detached as you.”

“He would have been reintroduced when the time was right. He could have been a bridge of peace between the Jedi and the Emperor’s Wrath.”

“Peace through silence. My way isn’t your way, Jedi. Don’t ever sign me up for that again.”

Rylon was looking searchingly up at Quinn. In spite of his tension he placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “It’s all right,” he said quietly.

“Mother?” he whispered. Quinn nodded. Rylon’s face bunched up and he turned away. But he didn’t shake off his parents’ hands.

“You have him now,” said Satele. “Maybe this was the Force’s will.”

“Maybe if you spout one more Jedi platitude I will feed you your own lightsaber.” Quinn schooled a smile to stillness. Ruth shot a glance at Rylon and subsided. “I hope you know about me and your son. Maybe he can be a bridge of peace between our two people, too.”

Satele went pale. “That’s between you and him.”

“Oh, so you concede that I have a say in some matters? How gracious.” Again, the surge, the bruised mastery. She deserved so much more than to control herself for this fool. But it wasn’t his place to say. “We’re leaving now. If you must deal with the Alliance go through Lana. I don’t want to hear about it.”
“We still need you against the Eternal Empire.”

“Master Shan, I am past caring what you need. Get out of my way.”

“I’m sorry you had to find out like this.”

“Yes. Jedi are often sorry when they get caught in their atrocities.” Ruth, nudging Rylon, walked past.

Quinn had to slow as they passed statue-still Satele. “She is not his only parent,” he said. “You wasted years of my life. There will be a reckoning.” She met him stare for stare. He thought about spitting in her eye, but Ruth and Rylon were already ahead and he needed to be close to them more than he needed to spread blame. So he left, following the two out into the open air.

Rylon was dragging his feet until he saw Quinn coming. “You’re my father,” the boy said distinctly. “Aren’t you.”

“I am.”

“You were in the dark house. You didn’t come with me.”

“I should have, Rylon. I only came too late.”

“Oh.” They were nearing the ship. Quinn was anxious to be off this world and away from one short lifetime of lies. “And she’s my mother. I didn’t remember what she looked like.”

“You were less than four years old, Rylon.” Ruth bit her lip and let it go. “I was captured and put in jail. I didn’t have the chance to write to you.”

“I wasn’t supposed to talk about my parents,” said Rylon. “I thought they did something bad. Is that why you were in jail?”

“No,” Quinn said firmly. Ruth shot him a look he couldn’t read. “Bad people imprisoned her. But she’s free now. We can take you home.”

“What did you call me?” the boy continued. “Rylon.”

“That is your name,” said Ruth. “Shevan was a Jedi lie.”

“Do I not have to be a Jedi now?”

“Not ever.”

“Oh.” He scuffed the path. “Huh.”

“Do you have any things to bring?” said Ruth.

“No,” said Rylon. Ruth raised tormented eyes to Quinn, and he nodded. This was the standard of living their child had been conditioned to.

The ship opened and swallowed them. They went to the bridge together. Ruth was humming with suppressed energy, but she let Rylon go enough for him to walk around the bridge, looking at everything.

“Is this where you live?”
“No,” said Ruth. “You’ll see tomorrow where we live.”

“Oh.” He turned and frowned at the two of them. He opened his mouth. He closed his mouth. Quinn waited in agony. He didn’t know how to begin to talk to a youngling and make him his child. “There is no emotion,” Rylon said in a small voice. “There is peace. There is no emotion, there is peace.”

Ruth sobbed in spite of her smile. “Oh, my darling boy. Peace is a lie.”

And, Quinn thought, seeing the two of them present and free, he had never been so happy in his life.
Rylon sat on the floor on the bridge. Ruth sat opposite him. Quinn sat in a chair, but he leaned forward. And the boy asked questions.

“What does that mean?” said Rylon. “When I said the Code. You said Peace is a lie.”


His face stilled, though she sensed no confusion in him. “You’re not a Jedi?”

“No.”

“But Sith are all red and they’ve got all this jewelry and their faces falling off. I’ve seen pictures.”

“Those are the species, Sith Pureblood,” said Quinn. “But people of any species can follow the Sith way.”

Rylon wrapped his arms around his knees. “All the masters say the Sith are misguided. But that can’t be right. Everybody knows what’s right. If you know what’s right and you do something else you’re evil.”

Ruth looked at Quinn. He looked helplessly back. “Not always,” she said.

“Do I have to be Sith?”

“I’ll give you the training. It’s up to you what you make of it.”

“Oh.” He considered further. “Is Father Sith?”

“No,” said Quinn. “I am an Imperial.”

“Oh. Does that mean you have to do what she says?”

Her laughter startled her nearly as much as it did her companions. “No,” she said. Quinn shot her a scandalized look. She laughed again. “No. Your father is a free man, and I am not the…”

“Emperor’s Wrath?” supplied Rylon.

“You caught that? I had that title, once. I’m not anymore.”

“Oh.”

Most of his answers were “Oh” and “Huh.” But he never lost interest in asking them. He was quick, he was thoughtful, he was interested in what they did and where they did it and who they fought and why the Sith weren’t Jedi and what that meant for him. Quinn’s voice thrummed
always at the edge of his control. Ruth tried to speak gently. She was furious at a lot of things just then, but anger wouldn’t serve her.

Her son. Her son. She ached to pull him in and hold him, but she couldn’t, not yet. She was a stranger. She had been there for his first word, his first steps, but little more.

“I’m hungry,” he said at last. “Do you have meal times?”

Ruth laughed softly. “Whenever you’re hungry, that’s when.”

“Really?” He tilted his head. “What if I’m hungry seven times a day?”

“Then you’ll eat seven times a day,” said Ruth, shooting a look at Quinn. He looked back at her with a smile that shredded her heart and patched it back up again, with all his old expertise.

“I’ll be back,” said Quinn, and rushed out.

Rylon fixed Ruth with his bright eyes. “If you’re a Sith how come you didn’t kill Master Satele?”

After what her old, tenuous ally had done? She didn’t know. “I didn’t want to spill blood with you,” she said. “I’m taking you where you’ll be safe. You don’t need to witness my battles.”

“Are you going to kill Master Satele after?” No fear, no pleasure, just curiosity.

“Probably not. What’s done is done, and she has been an ally in some of our fights.” She sighed. “Was she…a friend of yours?”

“She was nice,” said Rylon. “But she told me to forget him.” He jerked his head toward where Quinn had vanished.

Forget him…and forget Ruth. But then, Ruth was already forgotten. “You can get to know him again,” said Ruth. “Do you like the idea? Coming away with us.”

Rylon processed that for a few moments, his forehead scrunching and unscrunching. “Does it mean I don’t have to meditate?”

He was Force sensitive. Of course he would need to. “I don’t know, meditation can be very useful.”

“What if I’m hungry every time I’m supposed to meditate?” he said truculently.

“Then you’ve saved yourself. Strategist.” Her anger was subsiding, and a happiness so deep it scared her was rising in its place. She wanted to save the rest of the moments for Quinn. He deserved that much. And just then he came back with a heaping plate of food. Rylon made a little noise and jumped to his feet, hesitated, looked around for approval. “Go on,” she said, and Rylon ran to accept the plate from Quinn. He settled on the floor and dug in with every sign of enjoyment.

Quinn was coming to enclose volumes with his every look at her, and it would be overwhelming if she didn’t have an equal amount to say to him. Regret, mostly. But more hope than they’d ever had before. They let him eat.

“Can I go back to the house?” said Rylon through a mouthful.

Quinn asked permission. Ruth shook her head. “I still own it,” she said, “but it isn’t safe. Neither your father nor I has lived there in a long time.”
“Where was it? It was always raining.”

“A planet called Dromund Kaas,” said Ruth. “It’s the capital of the Empire.”

“Oh.”

“We can take you there,” said Quinn. “In a little while, when things are settled.”

“Are there big cities? I thought I remembered big cities, but Tython never had any.”

“A great city,” Ruth said softly. “It’s where I came from. Your father, too.”

“Where do you live now?”

“I travel,” Quinn said quickly. “We can keep you safe until there’s time to make permanent arrangements.”

The mission she had delayed lanced through her. “There’s something I have to do first.”

“Was Master Satele going to help you with it?”

“Evidently not.”

The transfer at the neutral port to Ruth’s ship was met with exclamations of delight. “It’s all dark!” he said, running ahead in the hallway. “Is this yours?”

“Yes,” said Ruth. “We served together for a long time on it.”

“Huh.” He kept looking.

They talked for hours yet, until Rylon’s yawns started outnumbering his questions. Ruth brought him to the crew quarters and tucked him in. Quinn stayed at her shoulder, so comfortable she wondered how she had come to live without it.

She settled on the edge of the bunk. “You’ll be safe here,” she said softly. By instinct she started humming an old lullaby. The verses were repetitive and hypnotic. She only stopped when she yawned herself.

Rylon’s eyes were still open.

“Not sleepy?” she said softly.

“There’s a lot,” he muttered.

“A lot of…oh.” Anyone listening in the Force must be hearing a bedlam of emotions. “We must be very loud.”

“Kinda.”

“Sleep well. Let us know if you need anything.” She patted his fine black hair and walked with Quinn to the bridge.

Quinn stepped well away from her and faced the flow of hyperspace. He set himself at parade rest, his habit when he was ill at ease.

She knew these things. She always would.
There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. Silently she walked up beside him; then, carefully, she slid her hand under his arm to settle around his waist. She had forgotten the feel of his body, like a mass of springs coiled to the breaking point. Somehow he never broke.

He started at the contact. After a few taut seconds he ran his arm around her shoulders and curled his hand around her arm. He pulled, then, tight, so tight it hurt. They held one another like that without speaking, watching the future race toward them.

It was an hour, maybe two, while they held wholeness, while nothing interrupted, while her shoulder prickled and ached. Finally, when she was sure her voice would hold, she had to speak. “Can you stay?”

“There would be no place for me but the one you make,” he said. “And I am past wanting your charity.”

She didn’t look up at him. “Where will you go?”

There was a long pause. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “For the longest time pursuing my duty meant finding you. Then it meant finding Rylon. After that…what commander could I possibly serve?”

“Do you want to go back to the Empire? She may need you when our fleets come back home.”

“But you will stay with the Alliance.”

“Well…yes.”

Something in him seemed to fold in. “Returning to service would be a homecoming of sorts. I believe I could be of use.”

“Good. I won’t always be able to…that is, the Alliance would adopt Rylon, gladly, but I want him to have you. In slightly more than a day every other month.” Which had been the arrangement before they lost him.

“I would be grateful.”

“You’ve earned him. You’ve earned him full time, you’ve earned him his whole life. I should be the one accepting your terms.”

“I know how to set terms,” said Quinn. “But I’ve lived long enough to know where the power lies.”

She squeezed his waist. “Were you alone all that time, looking for him?”

“I took on passengers at times. When it was advantageous. Never more than a jump. I paid them for what they knew, that was all.”

“So it wasn’t like it was here. With everybody, those years ago.”

“No. Nothing like that.” He angled his head. “Though I don’t miss Vette.”

“You do realize she’s freelancing for us now?”

“No. I never saw her.”

“Intentional. Sorry.”
“Major Pierce,” and the rank was a curse, “I knew about. Raising a crew of soldiers as erratic as he is, I’m sure.”

“We don’t talk much. Now, Jaesa…I need to reach out to her. There was just never time.”

“And the Talz?”

“He’s probably still killing in a straight line from wherever I left him. There’s no love lost there.”

“So it came down to you.”

“And Wynston. And Lana. And…Theron.” She tried not to say it with guilt and she could tell he tried not to hear it with pain. “I had a new crew pretty quickly. It helped.”

“Are they loyal to the Alliance? Or to you? You don’t have to settle for advisors who put the cause before you. Believe me.”

“I trust them,” she said.

“Ahh.”

She squirmed free, keeping her face away from him until she could wipe it. This also gave him the chance to dry his, if that was necessary. She had never made him cry before. She didn’t want to know now.

“I need to rest before we get back,” she said. “Can you keep watch?”

“As long as necessary. Go on.”

So she did.

They landed on Odessen. It felt like home. Rylon ran out and looked around. “Which way?” he said.

“Just a moment,” said Ruth, and caught up with Quinn, and turned to face him in the narrow doorway.

“I have to go,” she said quietly, intensely aware of her boy’s attention. “Arcann is waiting, assuming they haven’t reached him yet. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I know,” said Quinn.

“Take care of him.”

“I will.”

She tried to smile. It came out wobbly. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

Those eyes, the eyes that in years of absence and hardship had never faded, flickered down toward her mouth. “Are you sure?” he said, very calmly.

Her life flashed before her eyes: not as it was, but as it could be. Her son, and the father of her son, with all other conflicts defeated, all other obstacles swept away. It was the life she had thought was not allowed for her. Now that she had Rylon, anything was possible. The man standing before her had made it possible. Through wits, determination, courage…
…she had a type, didn’t she? And somewhere out there, Theron Shan was facing down a monster without her. With wits, determination, courage, those things she couldn’t stop loving. But not a Force-strengthened arm. That was hers to give.

She came back to Quinn’s aching closeness. She could drown in that gratitude, but today she had to swim. She caught her breath and cut aside with her eyes in the direction of their attentive son. “Let this be enough.”

“Of course,” he lied, and turned away, breaking the circle. “Come, Rylon. I’ll show you the base.”

“Where is my mother going?” Ma-ma, she thought, remembering. Mother. Mom. Anything, anything, not the cold pronouncement of “my mother,” but she didn’t have it yet. It would have to wait just a little while longer.

“Where she needs to go,” said Quinn. “There’s a war, and she is going to win it.”

* 

Ruth didn’t make it to the main building. It was a text message: “landing now. meet in medbay.” She strode out, past her son and her former husband. Into Odessen’s base.

There was a crowd in the med facility’s largest exam room. Pierce was standing outside, and he gave her a grim nod with no further elaboration. The collective emotion inside bludgeoned Ruth to stillness. She checked for Theron. He was there.

Wynston, head and ribs bandaged, spoke first. “Did you get what you wanted?”

“Yes,” said Ruth. What happened? You’re alive, so…”

“Not all of us.”

“Xalek’s dead,” said Theron. He looked so worried, so drawn.

“What?” He had been ruthless, very competent, and very young. “Why was he there?”

“Because we needed all the warriors we could get,” said Larr Gith. She looked drained. “Those that could be bothered.”

Wynston nodded. “We didn’t have anyone else and now he’s dead.”

Tebbith, standing in the corner, stayed dead silent. He was hugging himself and staring past the wall.

“But…Arcann?” said Ruth. “Vaylin?”

Lana’s voice. “Spirited away by Senya and missing in rubble, respectively.” Her arm was in a sling. No, part of her arm was in a sling. Lana watched Ruth’s realization with terrible patience. “I did the best I could.”

“Pathetic,” growled a voice in her head. “Pathetic! This is what they are without you to strengthen them!”

“Senya got to Arcann before he could finish the job,” said Wynston. “She wants to rehabilitate him. So she look him off his flagship. Apparently it was a big day for mothers.”
“Lana, I am so sorry.”

“We all do what we have to,” she said crisply. “For what it’s worth, his attack was meant for Valkorion. For the fragment of him in your head. The reason we’re still listening to you at all. He was furious that we boarded without you. That distracted him.”

“Lana is going to get a prosthetic hand,” said Wynston. “To replace the one she lost in an uneven fight.”

“And must you lose them by parts?” said Valkorion. “Or will you turn your will to the true problem?”

Theron scowled. “You don’t have to-”

“I see no harm in stating the facts,” Lana said coolly. “But the facts are this. The Eternal Throne is empty, if only momentarily. The Eternal Fleet didn’t manage to kill both sides. And, though I will not be combat capable for a while, you are. Barring further disruption we’ll be ready next time.”

“Yes,” said the voice in Ruth’s head. “I believe you will be.”

* 

Ruth wasn’t hungry, and it was late. She went straight back to her quarters.

Theron showed up a few minutes later. He looked fine. Just tired. Very tired.

He summoned a half smile. “You asked once if you could do no wrong in the eyes of the Alliance. I think this is it.”

“And in your eyes?”

He looked away. “I don’t know. You couldn’t have waited twenty-four hours?”

“I waited six years. For the only family I have left in this life. He’s nine, Theron. He has a crooked tooth. He’s curious about everything. He’s going to inherit the galaxy.”

“I love you. You know that. I want to support you.” He turned away and ducked his head. “Even if you make mistakes.”

“You had the people you needed. This alliance isn’t solely dependent on me.”

“Are you sure? Who inspires Lana to push herself? Who’s the only person Wynston doesn’t drink himself blind to talk to? Who coaxed the Jedi into line? Who told Senya…oh. oh, stars.”

And she followed, because he was so easy, so pleasant to follow. Usually. “Who told her she can throw it all away for family?” She rolled it around her brain and it only got heavier the more she looked at it. “Is that my fault, too?”

“N-no.”

The joy of the day was fast deflating, punctured by every injury she had seen. “I should go. Rylon needs me.” She headed for the dresser.

“No, don’t…don’t go. I’m tired, Ruth. It’s been a long day.”
“I know.”

“What are you doing?”

“Packing.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I need to be near him.”

“Then bring him here! I don’t mind, I’d like to meet him. I would.”

“Not like this, Theron.”

His voice took on an edge. “Is he going to be there?”

“I’ll make separate arrangements. I won’t pretend it doesn’t matter to me that he’s the only person on this entire planet on my side right now. But nothing’s going to happen.” She hugged a bundle of clothes to her chest and tried to school her breathing. “I love you, and I don’t think I would give a damn about the rest of them if it weren’t for the fact that you had the exact same look on your face. Good night, Theron.” And she ran for it.

*

Tebbith got people killed. It was what he did.

He hadn’t been in the room when Xalek faced down the Knights of Zakuul. He had instead been battling Arcann at Lana’s side. They should have easily overwhelmed him. If Tebbith was the Jedi everyone said he was, they would have overwhelmed him.

He’d woven the Force around the battlefield, sent waves of heat, of cold, of objects around the cavernous ship’s corridor sent to fly at – one person, not the other, it was hard to control which while they battled back and forth. A fleet outside Arcann’s flagship had been hammering the vessel with cannon fire, and the interior had been falling apart. Tebbith had intercepted falling sheets of metal and directed them away from where the lightsaber experts plied their trade.

Arcann had swung, and roared, and then Lana screamed too. She picked up her lightsaber from where it had fallen next to a strange little mass on the floor, and swung, clumsily. He would understand what that meant in just a few minutes. “Fall back,” yelled Tebbith, and started undoing his safeties, swinging metal back to hold between Arcann and the stricken Lana.

He hadn’t been strong enough. He hadn’t been fast enough. He hadn’t been tough enough. Tebbith got people killed. It was what he did. Today was no exception.

“Hey. Teb?”

Tebbith dragged his consciousness back to the present moment. “Larr Gith,” he said hoarsely.

“We made it. It’s okay.”

“I let him cut her hand off.”

“I don’t think he asked your permission first.”

“I could have saved Xalek if I’d been faster.”
“You were busy with the second biggest bad around. But you got Lana out alive. You did okay.”

He looked at his shaking hands. “Master Larr, I can’t keep doing this. There’s a reason I stay out of these affairs.”

Larr Gith looped an arm around his waist and nudged until he stopped leaning on the wall in the corner. “Come on. Let’s get you fed.”

The cafeteria was never really empty, but people made room for the big players. At the moment that meant Larr Gith, Tebbith…and Koth, who eyed them curiously when they neared his table.

“I was starting to think I smelled,” he said as they settled in.

“You came back when you were needed,” said Tebbith without making eye contact. “I thank you.”

“It was no problem, uh, Master Jedi.” Koth looked at both of them. “Listen, are you two okay?”

“We won a pretty major victory today,” said Larr Gith, and Tebbith thought, uncharitably, that she was lying through her pretty teeth. “Vaylin’s going to think twice about tangling with us again, and Arcann…”

“Senya can’t keep him hidden forever,” said Koth. “That woman has limits. I should know.”

“Didn’t she command in your military?” said Tebbith. Knowledge. He could work with knowledge.

“She led the Knights of Zakuul. I just served in the regular military. When my crew and I went AWOL she…hunted me. She took away a lot.” He couldn’t be that angry if he didn’t care. “But I know for a fact she’s not infallible, and we will use that. We’re following this up, right? As soon as the Outlander gets back?”

Larr Gith, unexpectedly, put her hand on Tebbith’s wrist. “We’ve got some things to patch up first,” she said in her gentlest tone.

“I’ll be fine,” said Tebbith, but he didn’t like lying, so he didn’t say it again.

*  

This is how Ruth thought about the next part going:

Rylon greeted her in Quinn’s temporary lodgings. “Mom,” he said, and yawned. “I’m tired.”

“Rest here,” she said. When she reached out he hugged her tight. “You’re safe.”

Quinn stayed, looking at her. “You were right, you know. You were always right. Don’t forget that. No matter what they say.”

“Thank you. Good night, Quinn.” And she got out of there.
Ruth helps Rylon and Quinn settle in, and makes a mistake. Wynston admits what’s been happening for months. Rylon wakes and starts getting a tour of the facilities. Wynston meets Rylon. (Ruth, Quinn, Rylon, Wynston, Lana, Theron)

Ruth adjusted her bag and knocked on Quinn’s door again. It was one of the newer apartments, that was all she knew.

Quinn answered the door. A certain strain around his eyes eased. “My lord. I thought it best to find a place with a real bedroom for Rylon. There are…two other beds. You are welcome, for as long as you require.”

“Where is he?”

“Already asleep.” He ushered her in and she peered through a hallway and a half open door. Rylon’s angelic face rested on the pillow. His eyes were closed, his air of breathtaking attention quieted.

“Is there someplace we can talk?” she whispered. Quinn, bearing the same face, pointed to another door. She followed him in to find a bedroom, comfortably if impersonally furnished. It was all she noticed before the heaving sob came.

“I failed them,” she said. “I wasn’t there and it almost fell apart. It did fall apart for Xalek. For Lana.”

“You saved someone, too, my lord.” He looked down at her face, intent. “You did the right thing. Imagine you had gone. Imagine you had fallen. Imagine Rylon never knowing his fierce, loving mother when we were this close to setting it right. You did the right thing.”

“I didn’t save Xalek. I didn’t save Lana. I thought I could take back the things I said to Wynston before I left, but when I came back…he was so disgusted. Quinn, I give and I give and it’s never enough. People still die.”

“Listen to me. If there is one thing twenty-five years’ service in the Imperial military taught me, it is that there is always a battle going on that you cannot reach in time. Always. You must choose the one at hand and win it decisively. Then and only then can you move on to the next.”

He was so steady. It was easy to find people to obey orders in Odessen. It wasn’t so easy to get them to believe. “I wanted your advice. I wanted your advice so badly after I left.”

“I wanted to give it. I wanted to give you something that would last.” He stood infinitesimally taller. “I never thought it would end up being him.”

“But it is.” She reached for his hands; his touch was cool and dry and humming. “And I’m glad it is. You look amazing with him.”

He smiled and squeezed her fingers. “So do you.”
The cheer faded. “There are two people in this galaxy who think I did the right thing today. And I
don’t know if that’s enough.”

He slid free of her hands and, carefully, placed his arms around her waist. “Should I say it again?
That your son needed every minute with you? That I needed every minute? That you took from me
the last of the burden that has dogged me for six years? That his spirit couldn’t do with one more
hour of Jedi crushing? What part of this isn’t clear to you?”

“Everyone left in this operation hates me. They were so angry, and they deserved to be angry.
Wynston…if that’s a grudge, now I know what it looks like.”

“Wynston doesn’t have a heart to be moved, and his assessment of character has a suspiciously
large overlap with his assessment of usefulness. You deserve better than that.” He pulled her close,
gently cradling her head under his chin. “What about Shan?” he said tightly. “Is he angry?”

“He’s trying not to be.”

“You deserve better,” he murmured, and turned her face up to his. “My lord, once you said that
you would go to your grave loving me. Did you mean it?”

Nothing’s going to happen. “I can’t, Malavai.” It was a mistake. His name burst free of the prison
of years.

“Very well,” he whispered. “I won’t ask you to.” And he kissed her.

The joy was treacherous and undeniable. She pushed up, sliding her hands up his arms, his
shoulders, and let him lead, feeling for once like nothing bigger than only them was lurking in this
breathless room. Maybe, she reminded herself desperately, this was just the remnant of a past she
had left behind a long time ago. But it was inextricably linked with a fragment of the future.

He broke contact with a ragged breath. “You’re shy.”

“I’m…not…” silence was so close and so tempting… “I’m not sure. We can’t. Oh, we can’t. I need
something simple. And, Malavai, you were never simple.”

“I could be.”

“No.” She looked around without seeing anything but him. “I should leave.”

Finally he raised his head and stepped back. “There is a cot,” he said. “I can stay there. We can
both be present when he wakes up.”

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You are always, and always will be, welcome.”

She shrugged off her jacket while he pulled a cot from under the bed and settled it crossways
against the foot of the bed. She pulled off her boots. He lay down on the covers and looked up to
the ceiling.

She pulled her pillows to the foot of her bed, near him. “It was nice, getting something without
killing for it,” she said.

He cocked his head to regard her with one eye. “Due to your self-control, not mine.”

“You could have done it. If you weren’t so obviously his father, you could have talked your way
in. Taking him to see a Master who called. Anything.”

“I would not have passed Satele Shan peacefully, were it only me.”

“She wouldn’t kill you. Only send you home empty-handed.”

“I would have to be unconscious first.” His throat worked. “You open doors, my lord, doors I had feared were sealed forever.”

“Some of them still are,” she warned.

“I take your point. Still. Thank you.”

“Did you ever think about this? Being together, with him. I mean, we didn’t know about him until it went wrong, but…before that. Did you imagine?”

“I expected a daughter,” he said quietly. “A great Sith.”

“She was never going near the Sith Academy.”

“What? She would be top of her class.”

“I wouldn’t send anyone I loved to the Sith Academy.”

“Very well. She would start with your lightsaber, though. The one you took on Korriban.”

“I always thought she’d be Force-blind.”

“Like me?” He sounded genuinely startled. “Wouldn’t that be a disappointment?”

“Never. She could go to the Imperial Academy. She could break all your records. All right, so maybe I had a rosy view of Imperial officers at the time.”

“All the same, I’m glad we were mistaken.”

“Me too. He’s perfect.”

“You really wouldn’t have minded?”

“Really and truly.”

In the low light he reached over, touching down next to her head. She clasped his hand with hers and rested them on the pillow. “It’s okay,” she said, tearing up and too happy to care. “It’s okay.”

* 

This is how Quinn thought about it going:

“You deserve better,” he murmured, and turned her face up to his. “My lord, once you said that you would go to your grave loving me. Did you mean it?”

“Malavai…” his name broke bonds he had thought locked forever…“we did it. He’s safe.” He kissed her and she kissed him back, yes, no fantasy could compare to that feeling in his arms, only in this version she went on and on, moaning softly in the back of her throat. “I need you,” she whispered. “All this time I needed you.”

“We’re together now.” And there in her arms was his absolution, and he made up for lost time until
they were both too exhausted to do anything but lay there and feel complete for once.

For the first time in a long, long time.

*

The exam room had had two tables rigged up. Neither parties’ injuries would have been helped much by a kolto tank.

Lana lay on her back, with the remains of her arm held secure in a sling. She would have to look at prosthetics in the morning.

Wynston lay on his back, wishing the cool compress on his head would actually remove some of his frustration, his tension, some of anything, really. He had been relieved of his flask and he was heartily hating his current chemical state.

He heard a catch in Lana’s breath. “Awake at this hour?” he drawled.

“It’s been a hectic day,” said Lana.

“Are you in pain?” If she was he knew exactly whose hide to take it out of.

“A little too hazy for that.”

“Ah.”

“Are you?”

“I’m fine physically. One has so many ribs, they get complacent if they aren’t tested now and then.” A brief silence. “It was still a disaster.”

“They were powerful. Would she have changed anything?”

“Of course she would’ve changed anything! She’s Ruth Niral, champion of the galaxy! You should never have had to face Arcann alone!”

“I had Tebbith, until he panicked. And I had you.”

“Right, the Force-blind with the pea shooter. That was relevant.”

“More than you know.”

“Lana, I will do anything for you, undermine any obstacle, but I simply can’t do what you do.”


“I’m not proud of what happened to you.”

“I’m lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“If we don’t pull together next time it will be worse.”

“I think she understands that.”

“Dammit, Lana.” His head throbbed and he relaxed his neck again, an act of will rather than
calmness. “I’m in love with you, you know.” It had, for once, predated the sex, if only he could admit it.

There was a space long enough to take a breath, if either one were breathing after that.

“I do know,” she said.

“I wish it were enough.”

“It is.”


“You are. It’s novel, I rather think I like it.”

Wynston grunted. “You should get some sleep.”

“You, too.”

“I’ll be here. When you wake.”

“I know, Wynston.”

“Just so we’re clear.”

It was silent then, except for two quiet currents of breath rocking in the darkness.

*R*

Ruth woke up with someone’s hand in hers. She had a dim recollection of shifting in the night, only to come back. Always come back.

As her eyes acclimated she realized that Quinn’s eyes were open where he lay on the cot at the end of her bed. He blinked and half smiled. “My lord?”

“Rylon?”

“I haven’t checked on him yet. I didn’t wish to disturb you.”

Reality lapped slowly over her. “Oh, stars. Theron.” She snatched her hand back. “I shouldn’t…I need to go.”

“Is it not somewhat late for that?”

“Don’t. I have to see him.”

“Then should I tend to our son?”

“Yes.” She sat up and cast about for her boots. “Quinn, nothing I said last night…”

“Or did, my lord?”

“Don’t.” She pulled on her jacket. “I can’t see Rylon now. I’ll check in once things are settled.”

“Has he forgiven you?”
“I won’t know if I keep wasting time here.” She had to say it. It was the only way to get enough room to breathe. “I’ll call you.” And she ran for it.

*

When Quinn entered the second bedroom of the suite he had commandeered, he found young Rylon awake and kicking the dresser drawers.

The child froze, wide-eyed. “Sorry,” he said.

There was a time to demand discipline and a time to make him comfortable. “The drawers won’t mind. Is something wrong?”

“I was bored,” he said.

“You can come out of your room when you wake up. This apartment is yours.”

“Oh.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Is my mother coming?”

“She’s busy.”

“Oh,” Rylon said glumly. “I’m not gonna be a Sith yet, am I.”

“No, but you’ll be well fed.”

The drawer was falling open. Rylon leaned over and pushed it closed, but his fix on Quinn’s eyes never loosened. “Are we going back to Tython? Ever?”

Quinn hesitated. “No,” he said.

“Why not? Because she’s Sith?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” His forehead scrunched up. “The masters all say we shouldn’t have attachments. I just wish I could’ve said goodbye.”

“I’m sorry. If they knew you were leaving they would have stopped us.”

He nodded. Slowly his eyes widened. “I got kidnapped, didn’t I?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Wow. Because of her.”

“Because of both of us, actually.”

“Oh.” Rylon adjusted his tunic. “I always thought my parents liked each other,” he said flatly.

It stung. “We do,” he said, more from hope than from reality.
“Really? When you look at each other you’re complicated, and she’s…grr.”

“Grr?” He hadn’t known a thing about her feelings since before her imprisonment. Even the
delirious touch of the previous night had been tentative at best. “What does grr mean?” The boy
hesitated. “This is important. What does grr mean?”

“I don’t know. I just met her.”

Quinn gave up. “Come. Let’s find something to eat.”

*

“Theron, are you there?”

Her voice was so very, very late. He was already fully dressed. He hadn’t slept much. He left his
console in the bedroom and came out to meet her. But he stopped short.

She hadn’t come back to their shared quarters last night, after bringing her long-lost son to
Odessen. He didn’t know what he had expected when he looked at her. Maybe a difference, other
than the dark circles under her eyes. What that meant, he couldn’t be sure, but he didn’t like one of
the top two possible explanations.

“It’s not right without you,” she said.

Flattering? Maybe. But he had to get it out of the way. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“I didn’t. I promise.”

He scoffed with a little sardonic smile, then suppressed it just as quickly. When they had parted
she’d thought he was angry over throwing away the mission to go take her son out of Jedi hands.
Maybe he was angry. It was hard to say. “I understand why you did what you did. And you’re right,
we shouldn’t just expect you to be hands on in charge 24/7. And, I can’t stand the way we left it
last night. Can’t we just start over?”

“With my son, or not at all.”

“You’re not going to blame him?”

“No.”

“I told you. I understand.” Would he have done it differently? Yes. A hundred times yes. But this
was the one thing he had ever seen Ruth Niral be selfish about. It was hideously badly timed, but it
was overdue. “I didn’t get a chance to get him anything. Let’s see what we can find on merchant’s
row.”

Her eyes were worried but she smiled. “You don’t have to bribe him.”
“Kids love being bribed. Come on.” He was riding to battle, and whatever present he picked, that was his first weapon. Maybe it didn’t beat being the kid’s father. But it was something.

When he’d found and purchased something small he tucked it in his pocket. “Where to?” he said.

“We can meet him out by the waterfall,” said Ruth.

“Your favorite spot.” A good sign. “Let’s go.”

She called, had a terse conversation with Quinn on the other side. Theron watched hawklike. There was tension there, but what kind he couldn’t tell. The kind that made her sleep over, he guessed. That kind.

Theron practiced leaning on the railing next to the waterfall. The mist was actually refreshing. The noise meant he didn’t have to find the words for Ruth. Not yet.

Quinn came around the corner, jaw tight and steps determined. Beside him walked a kid. The little tyke was the spitting image of his father, minus the mole and forty years’ ego-stroking. He regarded Theron with an unsettling dark blue stare.

Quinn came right up. “My lord,” he said, and bowed, and Theron had never fully appreciated the shades of “my lord” before. Now it sounded like a territorial marking.

She smiled at him, not quite comfortably. “Thank you, Quinn.” He nodded, turned on his heel, and paced away. Ruth looked at her son. “Rylon, I want you to meet someone. This is Theron Shan.” She stopped, obviously struggling for words. Had she not thought this out before? Was that a bad sign? “He is dear to me,” she said at last, and sought his hand.

Theron took back the hand he had offered Rylon; the boy had stuffed his hands in his sleeves and bowed, and he returned that. “Do you know Master Satele Shan?” said Rylon in a perfectly clear boyish tone. His accent was that of Coruscant – as most Tythonian younglings’ would be.

“She’s my mother,” said Theron. “So now I’ve met your mother and you’ve met mine.”

“I thought Jedi couldn’t have babies,” said Rylon.

“Yeah, well, she thought that too for some portion of her life.” He grinned. “Never mind. I trained with the Jedi for a while.”

“Are you a Jedi?”

“Not quite.”

“Are you a Sith? My mother is a Sith.”

“Yes, she is. And no, I’m not. I’m Force-blind, actually.”

“Then why did they try to make you a Jedi?”

“A mystery for the ages. Oh.” He reached in his jacket pocket. “Got something for you.” It was the size of a thumb joint and round; he bounced the little red ball toward Rylon.

The boy’s hand didn’t quite coordinate in the startled moment, but something made the ball swerve into his palm. He eyed it curiously.

“That’s yours. Welcome to Odessen.”
“I can keep it?” he said, wide-eyed, looking at his mother. Ruth nodded. She was glowing. Rylon promptly stashed it away in his pocket.

Theron laughed. “So has your mom already given you the grand tour?”

“My father did.”

The boy tensed and it took Theron a moment to realize that that was because he had. ”You’re lucky,” he made himself say, “Having a dad who’s involved. It counts for a lot.”

Quinn had stopped just in view, he realized. And was watching. Theron leaned over. He stole a kiss from Ruth, brief and decisive. Let the world make of it what it will. She flushed, but she didn’t say no. Then he looked down. “So, chief. Want to see the operations center? Can’t get in without a special invitation from one of the big guns.” And maybe that was petty, but it was good.

* 

Wynston wasn’t in the operations center, somewhat to Ruth’s relief. Lana was also missing, much to her discomfort. The place seemed empty without them. Ruth joined with Theron to show Rylon around the big display and mainframe computers. He took it in with those eyes that missed nothing. And, she realized, Theron was always staying in contact with her, a light touch here, a quiet hover there. It would be romantic if it weren’t so pointedly timed. And yet, she wasn’t about to complain. Somebody in this mess ought to get a clear impression, anyway.

“I’ve gotta get this one meeting out of the way,” Theron said at last. “I’ll see you for supper?”

“Count on it. Why don’t we go to the cantina this time?”

“Corrupting his morals already?” Ruth dearly hoped that Theron’s inimitable smile was as welcome to Rylon as it was to her. “Fine, catch you there.”

She ushered Rylon back out into the hallways, back toward her quarters. She rounded a corner and slowed. Wynston, looking clean in his black fatigues and jacket, slowed and stopped. When he looked at her, his mouth was grim. But then his gaze dropped to Rylon and his first reaction was a wide smile.

“As I live and breathe.” He closed half the distance and stopped. “You must be Rylon Niral.”

Rylon bowed cautiously. Wynston matched it. “I’m an old friend of your parents’.”

“You know my father?” said Rylon.

Wynston smiled and looked straight at Ruth. “Your father and I go way back.”

The bottom fell out of her world. She stared back, warning. Wynston’s smile turned crooked. “I’m sure everyone has already offered you a tour of Odessen. It doesn’t quite have Tython’s amenities but I think you’ll find it has more personality.”

“What’s an amenity?”

“Something that’s nice to have. Even if you have to pay for it.” He looked back up at Ruth. “It’s for the individual to decide if it’s worth it. Now, then. Do you play dejarik?”

Rylon nodded vigorously.
“I don’t get to play very often. Perhaps you’d be willing to, sometime this week?”

Rylon looked up at Ruth. She nodded back and said “We’ll set up a time.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” The smile returned, crooked and winning. “Have you started him on the Sith code yet?”

“It’s been less than forty-eight hours, Wynston.”

“Someone’s got to clear the Jedi cobwebs out. I believe you’ll be a good tutor.” He was so perfectly comfortable. “So, Mr. Niral. Force free you.”

“Bye?” Rylon said doubtfully.

Wynston smiled once more and strolled past.

Some unknown amount of time later Rylon looked up. “What’s wrong?”

Ruth shook herself. What exactly was wrong? That Wynston hadn’t immediately served revenge on the person he blamed for Lana’s maiming? That he had stayed silent about Quinn’s past crimes against Ruth? That he was playing nice and doing so convincingly? That he hadn’t looked that happy with her in years?

“Nothing,” she said. “Would you like to call me Mom?”

“Mom,” he echoed. “Okay.”
A Fiercer Watchdog

Chapter Summary

Ruth turns down an assignment. A shadow from Wynston’s past throws him off balance. Rylon asks Ruth about her priorities. Wynston and Lana discuss her hand and Rylon. Rylon goes on a field trip. (Lana, Theron, Ruth, Wynston, Rylon, Quinn)

“Lana, you shouldn’t be up,” said Ruth.

“I’m getting fitted tomorrow. I can’t spend much more time on my back before I start to lose my mind.” Lana took the nearest chair in the operations center. “Wynston has been keeping me apprised. Do you want the bad news or the bad news first?”

“Was that Wynston’s phrasing?” Ruth said slyly. Wynston raised three fingers free of his flask by way of a wave. Theron snorted. Things were pretty much the way they should be. Only now half her mind was on the classroom where Rylon was mixing with the other children of the base under Quinn’s watchful eye.

Something something Zakuul, something something...

“Vaylin?” Ruth said, startled.

“The one I mentioned thirty seconds ago?” said Lana. “Yes. She is on the Eternal Throne. We’re not yet certain how she relates to the Eternal Fleet but we know they aren’t in open hostilities.”

“Oh,” said Ruth.

“There’s an outlying world that’s held under the thumb of a somewhat confused band of loyalists,” said Lana. “A couple of leaders knocked out would turn the situation to our advantage.”

“Then we should do it. Wynston. I need to handle some things here over the next couple of days,” said Ruth.

“Ah,” said Lana. The room was very, very silent for a moment. “And is there a time when you’ll be ready to return to the field?”

Theron stepped in, his manner just a little too light. “You know if you leave him behind for eight hours, we’ll still have him here when you get back.”

Wynston leaned forward. “He has Quinn, Ruth. I hate to say it but I can’t imagine a fiercer watchdog. And if you don’t trust him, trust me.”

Ruth bridled. “It’s not the same as being there with him. I can still research and give instructions here.”

Lana shook her head. “I can balance this equation without you, Ruth, but not forever. Sooner or later you must return to the field.”

“Later,” said Ruth. “That’s all.”
Theron looked up from arranging the little bed in their side room. “There you are. Have fun with your boys?” he said, too brightly.

“Boy,” she corrected. “He’s fine. I can’t answer his questions about the Jedi fast enough. I need you for that.”

“Yeah. Here to help.” He had thought at first that Rylon’s questions would run out, but weeks on he was still going strong. “This kid’s got a whole town looking out for him.”

She smiled a heart-piercing smile. “I know. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

“Speaking of gratitude…”

“Yes? What is it?”

The thought that had troubled him all day…well, all week…all right, all month…went to pieces in his head. “Oh, boy. This isn’t easy.”

Her smile faded. “What isn’t? Tell me.”

“I get that Quinn is his full-time guardian, and that’s fair. It’s just that we’re all losing a lot of your time, and he, conspicuously, isn’t.”

She didn’t look guilty or angry. Just worried. “Theron, it isn’t like that.”

“Then what is it like, Ruth? What do you guys find to talk about for hours every day, most of them away from the rest of us?”

“This and that.” She blinked away and back again. “Nothing important. I’m not cutting back my time with Rylon, Theron.”

“And I wouldn’t ask you to. I don’t know how to solve this, okay? But you asked and I’m answering.”

“You want Quinn out.”

“I know what he did for you. I won’t argue with that. But you’re under no obligation to parent right next to him the whole time.”

She fell silent, her brows drawn together. Some time later she said, “I didn’t think about what it looks like to you. To everyone.”

“I know it’s not as important as taking care of Rylon. I just…can’t get around this.”

She stepped closer and reached out for his fingers, cradling them in two small hands. “I chose you. Every single minute of every single day, if anyone asks, it’s you. I’ll think of something, all right?”

He pressed his free hand over hers. Hers was so small, so warm. So close. “Thanks,” he said, and wished he could say something more useful. She deserved support. He wished he could give it without strings. But this one string really, really needed pulling. It was tied directly into his heart.
Ruth knocked. “Come in,” said Wynston from within.

He didn’t have the full suite most of the alliance higher-ups kept. In fact, the rumor was he just had a replica of his original ship’s quarters: a large bed, a single shelf, a small refresher, a well-stocked bar.

He was behind the bar. He gestured to the bed, and Ruth perched on its edge near one corner. He returned his hands to decanting something clear and purply-crimson into his flask. Once finished he gave her a strange look and pulled out a crystal tumbler for the rest of the bottle. “Can I get you anything?”

“Something mild in a color I can pronounce?”

“How’re you on ‘chartreuse’?”

“Very iffy.”

He grinned and selected something behind the bar to pour her a glass. With his usual relaxed assurance he handed her her drink and then settled on the adjoining edge of the bed, facing her. “How are you, Ruth? They letting you sleep?”

“I insist on it. I haven’t been seeing much of you.”

“Business.”

“It’s my business, too.” She had to smile a little. “Lana?”

Wynston grinned back, but his eyes were hard. “I’m doing my best to keep matters under control.”

“Odessen is an incubation box for rumors. Sorry.” She sipped. It burned. “But you didn’t call me here to get my opinion of your personal life.”

“You have the decency not to have an opinion. I appreciate that.” He was wrong, but she didn’t press. “No. I actually…never mind. Any other good rumors lately? I need someone else to transfer embarrassment to.”

“Not what you called me for.”

His smile slipped. He looked into his glass and, after a moment’s contemplation, downed half of it in one go. “I was just thinking about when you saved me.”

“Oh.” She had picked him out of a war zone to come back to her in the Odessen alliance. And she hadn’t regretted it for a minute. “What did you want to know?”

“You’ve told me. The Force guided you. And you followed because despite the fact that you’re one of the most grounded women I’ve ever met, you are on some level a mystic. Sith. That part of your life I will never have a part of, and I don’t regret that. It just is.” She didn’t often hear him like this. In fact she wasn’t sure she ever had. She listened. “Did I ever thank you?”

“Early and often. I know.”

“Liar. But now, thank you.” He finished the glass, got up for another. “I received a recruitment
letter from Imperial Intelligence,” he said abruptly.

“For you, here?”

“No. An old identity, one I didn’t do a very good job with.” He settled back on the bed. “Apparently it was good enough for someone to still want me.” He shook his head, hard. “Sith Intelligence. I tried with everything I had to keep it under civilian control. But we were just too good a prize to pass up. Damned by our own competence.”

“You weren’t really with Imperial Intelligence even before the change.”

“I know.” A sip, a scowl. “I was stranded on that planet during the blockade, you know. No ships. No escape route. No access to the continent with the spaceports. No identification to get me government transit. I wouldn’t mind, only…one night, after a particularly rough firefight, I lay down in camp by myself and realized, no one is coming for me.” He smiled darkly at his drink, then, as an afterthought, at her. And he drank again. “Generally speaking when I want someone to come they come. But out there? Sith Intelligence had given up on me. My own organization had just been ripped apart, they couldn’t even help themselves. All my life I’ve had the security of an organization bigger than me. Until that moment. I remade myself as a freedom fighter. It used my skills adequately. It was something to do, and I think it did some good. But Ruth, when I looked at the sky and realized no one and nothing in this galaxy was ever going to care enough to take me back….” He threw back his glass. He rose for another one without looking at her. “Then you came,” he said, pouring. “That’s all.”

“I was glad to find you. You know that.”

He nodded. “Do you consider me a friend?”

“One of the best. Besides Theron, probably the closest I have.”

He eyed her over his glass. “Even Quinn?”

“I need him. He’s not my friend.”

“But I am. Despite the fact that I come to you with nothing but problems.”

“That’s not true.”

He was already topping off his glass. “I couldn’t save Imperial Intelligence and I couldn’t save my shadow agency,” he said. “It forces me to wonder what I have to offer anyone.”

Frowning now, Ruth rose and faced him over the bar. She extended a hand over his glass, pinning it. And for a fraction of a second murder was in his eyes.

“I don’t think I want to talk to you with this,” she said quietly.

Wynston stared at the captive glass. “I don’t think I can talk to you without this,” he said stiffly. “Give it back.”

“Would you listen to yourself?”

“Quite clearly.” His eyes flashed again. “Fine. I was getting close to the point anyway. Something about you. Something about me. Something about…”

She had to put something between herself and him, so she did. “Lana,” she said.
“No,” he said sharply. “Not the point. Even if it were, say the word and she’s out on the street.”

Ruth laughed.

“I’m serious.” He leaned closer, his breath scything out before him. “If there’s a problem. If there’s a shadow of a problem. For you. She’s no longer any interest of mine.”

She didn’t like the shadows under his words, so she kept it light. “I want her to be happy. More importantly I want you to be happy. With her, if that’s what you want.”

“Hm.” He subsided. “Maybe I just needed to hear it.”

“She’s crazy about you. She tries not to be, but I can tell.”

“You’re biased.” He looked pointedly at her hand. “Maybe not as biased as you used to be, but still.”

He was a jumble, in her vision, in her ears, in her Force senses. The alcohol didn’t help. “Wynston, have you…talked to anyone? Since coming here? About everything.”

Wynston’s mouth thinned. “I think I just did.”

*

“Father’s going away?”

Ruth looked up from her laundry. Rylon was standing in the bedroom doorway, eyeing her curiously.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s returning to service in the Imperial military, where he’ll be helping preserve the Empire you and I came from.”

“When is he coming back?”

“I don’t know,” said Ruth. And she was trying hard not to care. “When he’s settled you’ll go and visit him. You’ll get two homes instead of one.” Out of her sight, but Quinn had promised vigilance among personal allies. Brief visits. It was better than denying custody altogether.

“Oh.” He was nine years old, pale, black-haired, blue-eyed, always thoughtful. “Why did you send him away if you didn’t want to?”

Ruth slowed. “Rylon, you can’t always grab at everything you want. I want to be your mother. I want to be Theron’s partner. That’s enough for one person.”

“He was happy talking to you.”

“I know.”

“You were grr talking to him.”

She smiled to cover her confusion. “And what does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” Rylon scuffed the floor with one perfect foot. “Everybody here is angry,” he said. “And afraid. I miss Tython.”

“Rylon, no. I took you away so you could have a life. Don’t look down on us just because we admit
we have feelings.”

“Master Orollo says you have to let them go or else they’ll control you.” He bit his lip. He made fewer of these references now than six weeks ago, but they weren’t gone yet.

Ruth shook her head. “Master Orollo may have good intentions. But if I weren’t the sum of my emotions I would be nothing. You, too.”

“The Force sustains you in the quiet,” he offered.

“Do you know what sustains me? My friendships. My cause. My love. For Theron, for you. Knowing that there are things I need to do, and that I can do them for the people I care about. The Force is bound up with all of this, it breathes exactly because my emotions move. I suppose it looks very messy to someone accustomed to Jedi bareness.”

“People on Tython were at peace.”

“Peace forged out of silence. Out of avoiding problems, denying realities, trying to force the world into a mold and cut off anything that doesn’t fit. I don’t trust Jedi peace, Rylon. Remember, through passion I gain strength.”

“From strength, power, from power, victory, through victory my chains are broken.” He tilted his head. “I never saw any chains there.”

“You would, if you went back now. You would see very clearly.” She prayed it was true. To have a child that didn’t understand her, well, parents told her that was normal; to have one who didn’t understand the Force would be disastrous.

“How come you love Father?” he said abruptly.

“Rylon, I…I don’t, not like I think you’re saying.”

He gave her one of those terrifyingly old looks. “Avoiding problems?”

Damn his memory. “That’s not the same thing, Rylon. Your father and I shared a great deal once, a long time ago, but it ended and it ended for good reasons.”

“Oh.” Rylon considered. “I mean, why do you love him and Theron both?”

“Because they’re the two best men I have ever known,” said Ruth. “And even when it isn’t good for me, I have always loved excellence.” She smiled self-consciously. “I am almost certainly not supposed to be telling you these things,” she muttered. And, louder, “You know my father raised me.”

“Colran Niral. Mr. Wynston talked about him.”

She would be very interested in what Mr. Wynston had said, but this wasn’t the time. “I didn’t see many of his friends. I don’t think he had many. But he talked to me about everything.”

“Not your mother?”

“My mother died when I was very young. It was just him and me.”

“Oh.”

“You know that’s one of the reasons I want Quinn in your life.”
He nodded solemnly.

“So he talked, Colran did. About my mother, about many things. He was always very honest. I want to have that with you. Which…is how we end up gossiping here.”

“You want to know,” said Rylon.

She smiled. “I value your impressions.”

“Mr. Wynston likes you,” reported Rylon, following some internal logic she wasn’t aware of. “He’s growly, but he likes you more than he likes anybody except Lord Lana. I think he likes me because he likes you.”

“He likes you because you’re a good listener and you can give him a run for his money at dejari...
feel this?"

"Yes, there’s nothing wrong with the sensors."

He took her other hand and laid it on his other cheek. "Can you feel this?"

"Of course I can."

"All right. We have step one.” He stared into her eyes, knowing she could read his with ease. For her, for once, for some reason, he didn’t mind that. “I can’t stand to see you tearing yourself apart over this. Train, yes. Push yourself, yes. But never tell yourself that you weren’t enough.”

Her metal hand brushed its thumb over his cheek. “You really meant it. When you said you loved me.”

“I am capable of sincerity at times.” More than that. “This, with you, everything since I came here to this Alliance, it’s had an effect. Lying comes easily to me but with you I think the truth isn’t such a worthless discard after all. I don’t know why a Sith spymaster would teach me something like that-”

“I love you.” Her fingertips dragged as she moved her hand up, but they furrowed through his hair just the same. And he knelt there trying to remember how to talk.

“Good,” he managed. “Otherwise staff meetings would be unbearably awkward.”

* Quinn had found an assignment in the Imperial military. It was dominated by Darths Acina and Scythia at this point in time, but that didn’t matter so much; the fact was it was still pointed against the Eternal Fleet. That was good enough for everyone involved. No one said it would be very useful if Quinn could earn his own command of a warship. No one said it.

Rylon was to travel, to see that there was more to the world than Ruth’s cocoon, and to come back very soon. The commander knew full well his life depended on safekeeping. Ruth wanted the transfer quiet but Quinn wanted it right, by Imperial standards. He wanted the Emperor’s Wrath and she wanted Lord Niral. She won that one. So when she exited the docking corridor into the Revocation’s corridor she found Quinn waiting with the commander.

Quinn was wearing a uniform. She had seen him in uniform maybe once, maybe twice, since the day she had expelled him from her life, years ago even to her time-skipped perspective. This seemed terribly, terribly recent. He looked good. Time seemed to change his gravity, never his face or carriage.

“Lord Niral.” He bowed extravagantly, breaking the electrifying eye contact. “Please, come aboard.”

She paused, staring. To say it was hard to see him like this would be the understatement of the century. He raised quizzical eyebrows. She flickered a look down his person and back. It was all the explanation she could give.

And she thought he smiled, for a fraction of a second, while she stepped forward.

Rylon came with her, declining to hold her hand. He stood beside her and looked at everything.

“My lord,” Quinn said briskly, “may I present Commander Rillins.” A man to be trusted, Quinn
had asserted; a man to shelter a Sith’s child with discretion and strength. No one else needed to
know about Rylon’s Force sensitivity. Just another officer’s child, and just for a few days.
“Commander, Lord Niral.”

The commander bowed. “An honor, my lord.”

“And her apprentice, Rylon Niral.”

“Young lord.” Another bow, and the nervous smile of a man faced with an organism he wasn’t
sure about. “It will be our honor to host you.”

“Captain,” said Ruth. “I’ll be in touch.”

“And I will be here, my lord.”

“If you require a Sith. Call for me. I will come.”

Commander Rillins covered his surprise well after the first half second as he turned to Quinn.
Quinn just inclined his head. “As duty requires, my lord.” And, weightily, “And as duty allows.”

Hers, he meant. He would understand if she couldn’t make it. The thing was, she wouldn’t. “Go
on, Rylon,” she said, patting his head.

He squirmed free. “Can I see the bridge?” he said, taking a trotting step toward Quinn.

“Under supervision,” drawled Quinn. “You may.”

Rylon’s face kindled. He turned back around to face Ruth, and she ached to see his smile falter the

“Yes,” said Ruth. “Yes, you will.” And Quinn, she prayed, don’t make me a liar.
I Needed Something Unique

Chapter Summary

Continuity goof! Scythia didn’t send troops to support the attack on Arcann. They hadn’t arranged that yet…

*

Theron welcomes Ruth home, nervously. Ruth returns to action. An arrangement is made with Darth Scythia. Theron thinks about parenthood. Wynston and Lana bond, but Lana raises an objection and goes to Ruth for support. (Theron, Ruth, Larr Gith, Wynston, Lana, Valkorion, Scythia)

(cw: alcoholism)

Theron met Ruth at the landing pad. He looked a little drawn. She hugged him, hard, and he hugged her back, bone-squeezing and wonderfully real.

“How are you doing?” he whispered.

“I’m okay,” she said back. “They’re far away now. As they should be, just so my life isn’t the only life he has. And he’ll come back to me when the time is up. And that’s just how this is going to be. This is my life now.”

He dipped his head to check her face. “Not how you wanted it?”

“That’s not it,” she said shakily. “I’m so happy, and grateful. I am.”

“It could’ve been simpler.”

It was impossible not to feel his tension. “What? How?”

“Can I tell you what’s been on my mind since the day you walked out next to Quinn?”

“What?”

He let out a nervous breath. “You didn’t have to pick me.”

Something cold slid into her gut. “Theron…”

“You have chemistry with him. I can see that, everyone can. And he was there for you a long time before I came on the scene.”

“Like the time he tried to shoot me? That being there for me?”

“I think…you overlook people’s flaws, when you want to.”

“Like the time he tried to shoot me? That flaw?”

“But you trust him with your son.”
She faltered. “Things have changed. He changed.”

“Which brings me back to wondering. Every day he was here with the son he gave you. Was that the last day I was going to get with you?”

“No. Dearest. No.” Maybe it was a little too loud. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did. Once. But…exactly how attractive is begging?”

“You make everything attractive.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to test the limits.” He smiled, a little uncertainly. “Want to come home?”

“As long as you’re there.”

He chuckled. “Want to get assigned to the far corners of the galaxy for dangerous missions?”

“With you?” So long as she had a ship to get back? “Yes.”

“All right then. I think we can work something out.”

*

Larr Gith noticed Ruth first. “Make way, make way,” she said. “The artist formerly known as Emperor’s Wrath is back.”

“Thanks,” said Ruth, grinning.

“Welcome back,” said Wynston.

“Thank you. Point me.”

“With pleasure,” said Lana, looking up from the war table. “Are you sure you’re ready for a mission?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.” She shot a look at Theron. He smiled back at her until she was weak in the knees. It didn’t take long.

“You’re not going to like this,” said Lana.

“But you were saving it for me.”

“Yes. I was.” Lana folded her hands behind her back, taking up a balanced pose. “The Alliance’s position is much more public since Arcann’s offensive failed. We are a power in our own right, and we must sort out our relationships with both the Republic and the Empire. And the Empire means one person.”

“You wouldn’t be this worried if you were talking about Empress Acina.”

“No,” said Wynston. “We’re not.”

“Then you’re talking about…”

“Darth Scythia,” said Lana. “I believe you’re acquainted.”

“Aren’t we all? She fought on Yavin with the rest of us. More recently she gave me a lead about
"Rylon," said Ruth. "One that didn’t pan out."

"Gave you?" said Wynston with a very high eyebrow.

"It cost me all the blackmail material I had on her. She’ll have covered that up; I can’t get out that way again."

"She’ll take us seriously if we send you," said Theron. "All you need to do is convince her that our mutual enemies are still the most interesting pieces on the board."

"Theron, tell me something honestly. Does she know about you?"

"Like you said. We were all there."

"And us."

His tawny eyes understood. "She knows I cared enough to do break into her house for you."

"Then don’t come with me on this."

"I didn’t say I was going to—"

"But you were going to."

"Okay, I was."

"Don’t."

Wynston was declining to stifle a smile. Lana cleared her throat delicately. "We have the logistics worked out."

Ruth returned her attention to the rest of the room. "Dromund Kaas. I understand."

"Pick your entourage," said Lana. "We need to look respectable."

"And varied. Koth. Wynston. That’s two out of three big players. Tebbith should do."

Larr Gith cleared her throat.

"Larr," said Ruth, "the last time you came to my planet you murdered our head of state."

"Well, someone had to do it. And you apparently thought you were too cool to do it twice."

"Tebbith’s a diplomat."

"Tebbith’s sitting in a corner hugging himself and rocking because you people forced him into a conflict he wasn’t ready to fight through. I’m going."

"We do have an SIS guy," muttered Theron.

"Are you sure? You’re a secret agent."

"So’s Wynston."

"He’s Chiss. He suggests loyalties beyond the reach of Dromund Kaas."

"And I’m a sane human being. It suggests loyalties way beyond the reach of Dromund Kaas."
“Fair point—”

The distance sharpened, the close blurred, the world dimmed. Ruth scowled. This wasn’t the time. And yet, Emperor Valkorion was at her shoulder, solemnly surveying the room. “Killing them with kindness?”

“Not killing them. That’s the point.”

“You gain followers through every method except fear. Yet only fear withstands tests. Only fear will drive them against my children when the next confrontation comes.”

“Funny, we did okay without that this time.”

“Except, for, you. You avoided the true battle, because you did not take it seriously. And you seem very upset by who paid. I think it would be to your advantage to be a little more afraid of the right things.”

“Like you?”

“Hmm. Are we not allied in this?”

He vanished.

She gave Theron an impatient look. “You’re coming, aren’t you.”

“At your side.” He winked. “My lord.”

Ruth gulped. “Don’t.”

“Yeah, just thought of that,” said Theron, grimacing. “All right, Ruth. Are we going?”

“You and me. Kaas City. Right back to the source.”

*

Darth Scythia, once Jora Mei, kept several floors in a knife of a building with a good view of the Citadel of Kaas City. She always did enjoy looking down at the Dark Council. Ruth made the arrangements via proxies. She didn’t see Scythia’s face until a masked servant separated Lana, Ruth, and Larr Gith from the party and ushered them into a high, shelf-lined study, lit only by the rain-washed daylight outside and a glowing sickle of a sculpture on the desk.

Darth Scythia stood. Her black desk dwarfed her; she was a short woman, Mirialan, with deep olive skin and a high tower of glossy black hair. She wore a corseted gown in shades of green with silver bindings. She didn’t smile.

“Outlander, I hear you’re calling yourself these days.” She nodded regally, her melodic soprano perfectly composed. “Among friends, surely, Lord Niral will do. Larr Gith, I simply must know how you keep your hair so compliant. And Lord Lana Beniko, you elusive little thing. Come, wasn’t there a time when we were all friends?”

“There was,” Ruth said firmly. They had had a common enemy in the jungles of Yavin, seven years ago. A simpler world, in a way. As simple as anything was with Scythia. “How is your Empire, Scythia?”

“Flatterer.” Scythia gestured and a low kitchen droid with a platter top…and a metallic, humanoid
head on the platter…distributed drinks. Ruth held her chill glass and sniffed at its contents. “How is your son, Lord Niral? Any luck?”

“You tell me.”

“Hm,” she simpered. “Regardless. The Empire is still reeling from the Eternal Rubbish. She deserves better than she got, and it has been my responsibility – with my colleague, Empress Acina – to construct what she deserves.” Scythia reached for a goblet on her desk and took a delicate sip. “But you, my dears, are not here to empower the Empire.”

“Kind of the opposite, if we have time for any coups before dinner,” said Larr Gith. “Scythia.”

“I think we have common interests,” said Lana, drinking with every indication of enjoyment.

“Oh, that tricky word ‘we.’” Another sip. “Who precisely is in that ‘we’, Lord Lana?”

“You, of course. Lord Niral and Master Larr and myself, of course. And…an Alliance of forces, expatriates from all three warring sides, who have come together to oppose the Eternal Empire in all its forms.”

Scythia’s green eyes rounded. “Oh, a secret alliance, how charming! And where does your secret alliance store its things, exactly?”

Ruth had to fight past a lump in her throat. “You. You already know. Don’t you.”

“Odessen seems like such a paradise,” she said, beaming. “I’ve had people there for months. Quite a scrappy little band of sisters you are. I can’t tell you how much I admire the arrangement where in the relevant people are here and the men are out there. Ah, but I hadn’t decided what to do with you. I suppose this visit forces the issue. Very awkward.”

“The Alliance and the Empire have something to offer each other,” Lana said coolly. “Vaylin is stalking planets like it’s a sport. The Eternal Fleet accepts no live master. We can deal with these threats, but we would be stronger with you.”

“To remove Vaylin and her metallic friends? Ambitious.”

“The three of us could do it blindfold,” said Larr Gith. “You’ve seen the holovids. You know. It’s really easiest to join the winning side.”

“Not only do we have armies,” said Ruth, “we have assassins.”

“Don’t be modest, ex-Wrath, you’re the best assassin the Empire ever produced, a fact I’ve been very jealous of. I prefer such people to be on my payroll.”

“You flatter me.”

“Tell me. You weren’t expecting me to know about your little operation. So what is it, exactly, you were hoping to give me?”

“Details of its existence,” said Lana. “And with it, military support. Intelligence on the goings-on of the remnants of the Eternal Empire. One extremely qualified assassin, when the time is right.”

Scythia made a moue of delight. “Ruth,” she said, looking from Lana to her target. “The leash none but the Emperor has dared to grip for a decade…and the one she tore out of his greedy little hands. For me? Really?”
Ruth shifted. “When we agree on the target,” she said, and shot Lana a dirty look.

“Oh, we all know the obvious target.” The Mirialan smiled sweetly. “For now.”

“Her help doesn’t come for free,” said Lana. “You realize that.”

“And what do you heroes desire from Darth Scythia?”

“Drop dead?” muttered Larr Gith.

Ruth thought crazily about folk tales with genii and faerie spirits, when the phrasing of a question could be life or death. This was one such moment, and Lana had better know it.

“Mutual defense,” said Lana. “Intelligence sharing. The assurance that when the Sith Empire has the chance to strike our mutual target, it will do so, with power.”

Scythia raised one bejeweled hand, her fingertips spread toward the ceiling. She looked through them, half-lidded, while purple sparks started to lick up her fingers and arc between fingertips. The air above her hand started to shimmer. Ruth’s hand strayed to her side. A bolt of lightning flashed between fingers and ceiling. Another. Another, dragging branches along with it. The storm roared and snapped from hand to ceiling, to windows, and lashed out at the shelves, brighter every moment. Death bellowed at everything except the four Force users, who sat very, very still.

All at once it vanished, leaving afterimages and a strange, battered silence. “My dears,” purred Darth Scythia. She closed her fist. “I know how to strike with power.” She stood, extending two unscathed hands. “You have a deal.”

*

The men were in the parlor where Scythia had left them. “Anything?” said Lana.

“Just the particularly charming stare of that monster in the corner,” said Theron.

“Oh, him,” said Lana. The hulking modded Shadow Killer in the corner glared, red-eyed. “Don’t worry, as far as I know he only eats Force-users.”

“Could we kill him?” Larr Gith said hopefully. “No?”

“You’re in a good mood,” Ruth said tightly. But she waited. She waited, leashing her raging heart, until they were all back on their transport to Kaas orbit. She turned to Lana. “You sold me!”

“She what?” said Theron.

“You offered her my services as if I were one of your spare lightsabers!”

“That is what you’re there for, isn’t it?” said Larr Gith.

Lana pinched the bridge of her nose. “I needed something unique, Ruth.”

“Then get a snowflake! The only reason I didn’t shove your own foot further down your throat back there was that we need all our fighters in case she gets creative with the Force lightning!”

“You mean more creative,” Lana said wearily. “I think we have what we need from her. Empress Acina will fall in line.”

“Great. And how are you going to bribe the Republic? Offer my services in throat-crushing?”
“If it eliminates the Fleet? Yes.”
“Ask me next time.”
“I thought it was implicit.”
“Make it explicit. Beforehand.”
“Context?” said Wynston.
“I am apparently Darth Scythia’s personal executioner for one hit of her choice, in exchange for her support.”

Theron buried his face in his hands. Wynston cast Lana a wary look. “You realize you’re putting her in an extraordinarily dangerous position.”

“She can handle any assignment Scythia gives.”
“Yes, but will it be someone we need? She could name you, Lana. She could name Ruth herself.”

“They double cross her. I don’t see the problem.”

“See, now that makes sense,” Larr Gith said cheerfully.

“I could show you the last three people who double-crossed Scythia,” said Ruth. “Only they’ve probably decomposed quite a lot by now.”

“We have the Empire,” said Lana. “That’s all that matters.”

Ruth leaned back and scowled. “I hope you’re right.”

* * *

Wynston kicked his boots off and sat cross-legged on the bed, watching Lana disassemble her outfit. “How did you do with the Jedi?” he said.

“We got a few,” said Lana. “They seem very eager. With the Council tied up in a corner they’re anxious for direction. Theron or I will be supervising them in the field.”

“Ruth can monitor and take him down if you’re worried about problems.”

“Ruth…” Lana sighed. “Ruth will do what she wants to.”

“She wants to help.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

He didn’t want that fight to ruin another evening. “You know you’re very sexy when you say that?”

Lana laughed. “You would call me sexy if I was saying ‘systematic tax evasion.’”

“Evasion?” he drawled, and slid a hand to flatten the sheet beside him. “Tell me more.”

“How much of your life have you spent just pretending to be interested in what people are saying?”

His smile faded. “That counter has never ticked a second in your presence.”
She set down her cape and gave him a sly smile. “Liar. Kiss me.”

Their lovemaking was maybe more verbal than average, consisting of a long flowing stream of calls and responses. This particular night wasn’t one for experiments, and he carefully, intensely monitored that to be sure.

She went to the refresher, came back still naked, looking radiant, and kissed him. There was no one else like her. There never had been. “What is it?” she said.

“Would you mind if I stayed tonight?”

She looked stunned, but her voice was calm. “Oh, and that only took you how many months? Next you’ll be admitting we’re doing this.”

“Very likely. Everyone who matters already knows, though.”

“Oh? Who matters?”

The inner circle. Ruth and Theron, mostly. He drew her down over him. “This one. I told you she already knows. Oh – I got you something.” He wriggled aside and leaned down toward his discarded clothes to draw out a little black box from next to his flask. “It happened across my view while I was being hurled downtown by that rancor a few days back. I thought, the least I can do is give a little custom to the merchants whose storefronts I was impacting with.”

“You’re very thoughtful,” she said, laughing. She knelt on the bed and pulled the sleeve off the box to open the top. Inside was a necklace, gold links interspersed with orange-red gems in filigree settings. “Wynston, it’s beautiful. But you know I don’t wear much jewelry.”

And all jewelry looked pretty much the same to him, except as a vehicle for praise for the wearer. “Try it. Don’t worry, it’s got four releases on it, anyone who tries to strangle you with it is going to find himself with one fist full of broken necklace.”

“You think of everything.” She raised the necklace.

He took it from her hands. “Let me. Just hold your hair up.” She obliged while he set the chain around her neck and did up the clasp, letting the stones settle just below the hollow of her neck. He let his hands fall and leaned back.

She kept her back upright, shoulders back, hands up holding that spill of golden hair. Her yellow eyes sparkled. “Aand, your entire purpose here was to get this image burned into your brain.”

“Absolutely. Do I still get to stay?”

“Just try leaving.” She let her hands fall, and kissed him. “You don’t have to play games, you know.”

“But I know so many.”

“I know. That’s not what I love you for.”

He went immediately on guard. He didn’t like talk like this. Even after he’d said it once he didn’t feel comfortable with it. Being in love, really and truly, for the second time in his adult life, wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted to assail with words. “Not even a little bit?” he said playfully.

“I love you for the man you are when we’re out there. No amount of game-playing is going to
He grinned. “It could enhance it a little.”

“You don’t have to. Now, stay with me. Let’s see if we can get eight hours without a crisis showing up.”

A problem with an easy solution. “I could sabotage comms.”

“No games.”

He stood. “You’ll thank me for this later.”

“Stop it!” She grabbed his arm and pulled him back, just a little too hard. The plain primal possessiveness of it sent thrills all through him, and he fell back without a further fight.

* 

“Theron?”

Theron held still.

“Theron, what’s wrong?”


Ruth sat up while the shadows of the night slid around her. She didn’t like how closed he sounded. “What about?”

He turned over and looked up at her, cybernetics gleaming in the low light. “This wasn’t originally about mommy issues.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You know my mother decided not to have my father involved in my life.”

“I know.”

“Then she decided not to have herself involved in my life.”

“A mistake.”

“She meant well. She knew that attachment could ruin everything she’d worked for, and how do you have a kid without attachment?”

“She was an idiot.”

“I’ll admit, it was a change, going from Jedi detachment to…well, to being the second most important thing to you.”

“The most important thing. My loyalty has only two settings, and one of them is ‘off’.”

“Is that true, though? Think about it. Think about your son. You would rearrange worlds in their orbits for me.” He took a quiet breath. “You would burn them for him.”

“He needs that. He can’t protect himself. You I can trust to fend for yourself.”
“So which was right? Giving him up at birth, or ripping the galaxy in half to keep him?”

“You know my answer. You know Satele’s answer. Do…you have an answer?”

“I…don’t know. Maybe if I’d ever been a parent I would understand more. Satele didn’t have any prior experience.”

“Nor did I. If I could’ve changed things for you I would have. You deserve love, security, identity, all these things. All these things you grew up to earn. You made it, Theron, in spite of everything. But I will never believe that she was right to make you fight for it.”

“Fighting isn’t the Jedi way.”

“No. Outsourcing heartache is.” She paused. “Rylon will never have to fight for the bare basics of love.”

“Or the big gestures. C’mere.” He reached for her and gathered her in strong arms, musing her hair with one hand. “I’ll give you this, you put your money where your mouth is.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“No.” He squeezed. “Get some sleep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He touched his nose to her shoulder and sighed once more. “Get some sleep.”

*L*

Lana was sitting atop the mussed sheets when Wynston came out of the refresher. She looked tense.

“Is this yours?” she said, very casually, holding up a squat brown glass jar. “I found it under the bed.”

Ah,” he said. “Yes. I thought since I was staying here more often I’d have it, just in case.”

“In case of what, exactly?”

“Lana. It’s a nightcap. That’s all.”

“Where’s your flask?”

He pointed at his jacket on the floor.

“Where’s your next drink if those two are gone?”

His own quarters, halfway to the cantina. There at least he had some privacy. “I don’t know. Is there a point to this?”

“You tell me, Wynston.” She dropped the bottle on the bed. “But this isn’t staying in my quarters.”

“Lana, be reasonable.”

“It’s my room.”

“You can still be reasonable in it.”
“It. Goes. Take it back to your room, which, reputedly, consists of a bed and a bar. But don’t leave it here.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so confrontational about this.”

She set her jaw. “You can take it out now.”

“Fine.” He stalked over to scoop it out of her hands. “Good night, Lana.” He wasn’t coming back. Not until she’d had a night to think about what she really wanted to fight over.

*

“I’m not feeling well,” said Wynston, hours after some conversation he’d had with some woman in Odessen. And, with that, he left ops and weaved a tiny bit on his way out.

Lana came to Ruth first. “There’s something we need to discuss,” she said.

Ruth gave her a quizzical look but stayed quiet. Lana redirected their steps. “Your quarters. I don’t think they’re monitored.”

“Lana?”

“Bear with me.”

When they reached Ruth’s outer room they let the door fall shut. “It’s about Wynston,” said Lana, sounding rushed, “and I need you to hear me out because I don’t think I can do this if I slow down. One of the first things I noticed about him after you brought him back to us was his fondness for that flask. And he seemed to be balancing it, and that’s his own business. But it’s not balanced anymore. And I’m afraid I started it by trying to confront him.”

“You confronted him?”

“When he tried to store a backup in my quarters.”

Ruth let out a slow breath. “I see. I didn’t think it was a problem. A quirk, yes, but not a problem.”

“This quirk is going to get him killed. Ruth, he can’t keep going like this. I can’t keep looking over my shoulder, wondering whether he’ll be in any shape to back me up.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do? Confront him again. With evidence, this time. With you, if you really care about him.”

“And do what after? Any possible solution is going to take him out of the team for weeks.”

“Leaving it alone makes him part of the problem for more than weeks. More than anyone, I want to keep what I have with him. But it can’t be like this.”

Ruth considered for another long few moments. “I agree,” she said tensely. “I’ll do what I can.”
**The Grand Champion**

Chapter Summary

Lana, Ruth, and Theron confront Wynston. An unexpected ally interrupts the intervention. Tebbith and Koth mention the past. Wynston leaves town.

(cw: Alcoholism)

“Theron,” said Lana, “you should be involved. Since Ziost you’ve known him longer than anyone except Ruth.”

“And you.”

Lana sighed. “And me.”

Theron frowned and took stock of the request. “Look, I wasn’t going to ask him. He’s there when we need him, even if he’s been a little wobbly lately. Are you sure you want to open this can of worms?”

“It’s leaking already. I don’t see that I have a choice.”

“Hey. Lana.” Theron studied her yellow eyes. “Are you going to be okay if we do this?”

“I don’t see that I have a choice.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Lana touched her hair. Then, she gave a shaky sigh. Theron stepped in and hugged her. “It’s gonna be okay,” he murmured. “If I have to drag that womp rat into rehab myself.”

Wynston accepted the summons into the office next to the ops room. He cast Ruth, Theron, and Lana a curious look. “What’s this, then? Mission too secret for the staff?”

“Wynston,” said Ruth, “you are my oldest friend. I need you to remember that.”

“It goes without saying,” said Wynston. “Doesn’t it?”

“We’ve been going without saying a lot,” said Theron. “You’re my counterbalance, Wynston. I rely on you.”

“Lana? Are you in on this hugfest?”

“I love you,” she said. “Please believe that.”

“I do. Do you want that more public? Streamers in the sky? I can oblige.”

“Not, the point,” she said unsteadily. “Wynston, I have to ask for your flask.”
Wynston stilled, frowning. “I thought we’d settled this.”

“You unwillingly removed your supply from the bed we share. That hasn’t loosened its grip over you.”

“It’s a beverage, Lana. Stop attributing magical gripping powers to it.”

“If it doesn’t have powers, why do you need it so much?” said Theron. “It’s always the three of us on missions, you, me, and it. I’ve started losing track of who’s calling the shots.”

Wynston scowled. And just then, the door opened.

Torian Cadera rushed in. “Lord Lana! Lord Ruth! Found someone you want to meet.”

“Torian,” said Lana, “this isn’t a good…”

A tall woman in full armor walked in. There was a moment’s irresolute silence. The woman popped off her helmet, revealing a dark-skinned Chiss whose face was brilliant with joy. “Hsin’bo!”

Wynston fell back a step, his face freezing in neutrality only slightly betrayed around the edges, his companions forgotten. “Bot’uhn.”

The newcomer tossed her helmet aside and sprinted, moving the full weight of her armor with blinding speed. She threw her arms around the much shorter Wynston and squeezed him. Gingerly, he hugged her back. They spoke in a blisteringly fast stream of Cheunh while the others in the room exchanged bewildered looks.

“Calline?” said Lana.

“Grand Champion of the Great Hunt a few years back,” said Torian. “I didn’t realize she knew Wynston.”

Tears were springing in the Grand Champion’s eyes. She kept talking as she eased backward and loosened her grip to a light hug. Wynston had revived somewhat. He gave short, soothing responses, at one point reaching up to touch her cheek.

Lana cleared her throat, loudly.

Wynston looked away from the newcomer. “There’s something I need to take care of,” he said, and tumbled another few sentences at the Grand Champion, and pulled away. He adjusted his jacket and ran for the door.


“On it.” Theron moved.

“I should, uh,” said Torian. “Call me when there’s a fight, okay?”

“Thanks, Torian,” said the Grand Champion in accented Basic. “Looking forward to it.”

And then there were three.

“Hi,” said Ruth. “We’re friends of Wynston’s.”

“Very good friends,” Lana said flatly. “As are you, it would seem. They so rarely come back here.”
“You’re very welcome here,” said Ruth. “Really, any friend of Wynston’s…”

The Grand Champion swiped a few tears from her eyes and gave a tremulous smile and said the one thing Ruth wasn’t ready for. “He’s my brother.”

*

“So,” Lana said briskly. “I’m not certain we started off on the right foot there.”

“I’m Ruth Niral,” said Ruth. Her heart ached for the woman who had just watched her brother run. “I don’t think you ever saw me without my mask on.”

The Chiss tore her eyes from the doorway and gave them both a suspicious look. “Emperor’s Wrath, right?” she said. “Huh.” She tucked her mouth in smaller and nodded to Lana. “Lord Beniko.”

“Wynston never mentioned family,” said Ruth. Dread kept her from asking further. If she didn’t know this it was because Wynston didn’t want her to know. Then again, his wishes hadn’t exactly been constructive of late.

Calline nodded sharply and took an interest in the floor. “He fights the Eternal Empire now?”

“Yes,” said Lana. “We do.”

She looked up. “I’m in.”

“Calline, where did Wynston say he was going?”

“He just asked me to wait here.”

Ruth looked at Lana. Lana clearly had the same thought. “We sent Theron after him,” said Lana. “We’ll hear back soon enough.”

*

Wynston tore through the one drawer of clothes he had. “She can’t see me like this.”

Theron waited in the doorway. “Like what?”

“Like–” Wynston gestured all over the room and himself – “this. Wynston isn’t her brother. Wynston isn’t the boy she’s probably forgiven a hundred thousand times over because she’s too bloody good to know how to do otherwise. She was so much kinder than I am.” He stopped. “I need to get out of here. Just for a few weeks, until I’ve had time to bring old hsin’bo back with a straight face. Where do I hide…”

“Rehab?” said Theron. “Just a thought.”

“I don’t need it,” said Wynston.

“It’ll give you something to do while you make up your mind on whether to give your family the time of day.”

“You are not being constructive, Shan.”

Theron gestured impatiently. “I’m trying. I’m serious. The way I see it you’ve got two ethical ways out of this, and one is to go out and talk to her because whatever’s in the past between the two of
you she’s obviously ecstatic to see you, and the other is to take a retreat someplace that’ll leave you better than it found you. I have no idea what is going on in your head right now. But I think I’ve got your options pegged.”

Wynston threw down the clothes he had been rifling through. He straightened, took out his flask, tossed it on the bed. “Rehab, hm? I suppose all my good friends already had a place in mind when they were talking behind my back.”

“Balmorra. Republic territory, the Imperial machine can’t get to you there. A private facility, its main shareholder owes us some favors. We can get you there discreetly.”

“And how long does it take to scrub a brand new me?”

“I don’t know. Weeks?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Wynston rubbed his hands together. “A few weeks should be enough. If I can just not be here for a while, until I know what to say. She’ll have to wait, of course. Can you keep her occupied?”

“I-what?”

“Never mind, I’ll ask Lana.”

“Can I just say that I would’ve thought any reason to go to rehab was a good one, until you demonstrated trying to cut off your long-lost family as a reason?”

Wynston’s presence seemed to snap and hum. “Theron, do not lecture me on the closeness of family.”


“If nice were a good enough reason this galaxy would look very different.” He picked up a few articles of clothing. “I need to get out of here. I need something to do that isn’t this.”

“When are you going to face her?”

Wynston gave him a level look. “I don’t know.”

* 

Theron’s message was a hastily sent text. “Landing pad 9.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Lana. “He’s running for it.”

Calline’s lips thinned. “Where to?”

“Follow me.” Ruth fell in as well. Calline studied these two as she walked. Human, of course. Dressed in muted and practical clothing. Of their characters she could determine nothing. But her brother worked with them. Had they dragged him away from his family? Or was that separation all his idea? She didn’t want to believe that. But a man didn’t drop off the face of the galaxy for twenty-five years without participating in that disappearance at least a little bit.

They rounded a corner and Lana almost ran face first into…what did they call him? Wynston. He didn’t want his name used.

“Oh,” he said, and started to walk around them. “Something’s come up. We can deal with this
“How about now,” said Calline in loud Cheunh, and raced to catch up. “Slow down.”

“I have to do some things first. You must understand I’m a busy man.”

“Too busy to have a name? Too busy for me?”

“I can’t answer this here. My career relies on secrecy.”

“And mine relies on finding people. Where do I get answers? When?”

They stepped onto the boardwalk leading to the landing pads. Wynston fetched up short. “I’m not dismissing you. But there are things I must settle. There’ll be time. There’ll be all the time in the world.” He turned away.

And, when she tossed the tracking device into the back of his bag, he whirled.

Quick as thought she threw up her hands to block his incoming fist. He hit with shocking power for someone his size, full followthrough. Part of her brain admired it. “Stay back,” he said loudly, and darted to one side, tried to hit her again. She blocked. His kick sent pain coursing up her leg, and he was showing no sign of letting up. She reached for his arms, only to have him knock her hands aside and kick her again. He had nimbleness and ferocity but she had strength, and while she suspected they both had a lot of experience scrapping, he was a little sloppy about it. When he attacked again she sidestepped, tripped him, and bore him to the ground.

He wriggled one arm free, the tracking device resting damningly in his hand. “For those benefit is this?” he said roughly. In Basic.

“Mine,” said Calline, keeping him pinned. “How else am I supposed to know if I’ll ever see you again?”

“I told you back there. According to some people I’m sick.”

“I get that.” Back to Cheunh: “Let me help.”

“The entire problem is that I needed things too much.”

“Needing people isn’t the same as needing things.”

“Let me up.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“Let me up and I’ll answer that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yes. You’ll see me again. Let me up.”

Calline eased up and offered him a hand. He scowled terrifyingly at her, but took it.

“I’ll be back,” he said loudly, in Basic. He looked past Calline toward the blonde Human, Lana. “I will be back. I just have to do this one thing.”

“Hsin’bo,” she said. Big Brother.
He made eye contact. Like a trapped animal. She’d seen it plenty of times in her bounty hunting career. “Yes?” he said, surprisingly gently.

“Say the word. I’ll back you up.”

He smiled a little. “Getting into fights so soon, bot’uhn?” Little Lump. He was the only one who called her that.

“Just with you.”

The smile widened. “I never thought you’d be a scrapper.”

“I never thought you’d be a runaway.”

He sobered. “Surprises abound. I’ll be in touch, Calline. Get to know these people. They’ll be your best friends if you let them. Lana, Ruth…” he would say that they should call if they needed him, but he needed the separation more. “I’ll be back soon.”

Both Sith nodded. Lana was more convincing at smiling than Ruth was. “Take care,” said Ruth. “Do,” said Lana.

Calline tapped her foot. As Wynston walked away, it was already too long an absence.

*

“Out here again? They didn’t run you out of your library, did they?”

Tebbith turned away from the landing pads. The day was fine and breezy, and Tebbith had documented the day’s sightings of birds around the complex. It was frivolous compared to some sorts of stored wisdom, but he liked it.

He smiled at Koth. “I was just taking notes for our environmental survey,” he said. “Are you about to leave?”

“No, I was just in the area. Everybody in ops is…intense. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“I haven’t been…involved, in their decisions, much. My work is here, on Odessen.”

“Why?”

Tebbith started. “I’m sorry?”

“Everyone speaks highly of you. Everyone. Lana speaks highly of you and she doesn’t even like nice people.”

“I try not to disappoint,” he said. “But being well liked isn’t a qualification for making decisions.”

“You’re a Jedi. They’re supposed to be…fair? Sane? Balanced? Wise, even?”

“Wishing doesn’t make it so. I think your brand of practicality is more what this alliance needs.”

“I fix a ship and point it so it goes boom. Anyone could do that after a few years’ training.”

“And the discretion of pointing? Not to mention the ability to coordinate an entire crew of people whom I know for a fact you didn’t buy with credits? Don’t sell yourself short, Captain.”
“All right.” Koth frowned and sighed. “I didn’t come here to get in your face, honest.”

“No, it’s all right.” Tebbith hesitated. “They don’t…talk about me, do they?”

“Only to point out when you’ve been helpful.”

“I’m…glad.” Tebbith tucked his datapad into his robes and crossed his arms, not quite hugging himself. “Captain Vortena, I’m not unaware of the risks and struggles you’ve all been going through. And I am trying to help. Maybe I could take the occasional negotiation. When the time is right. When the need is great.” He looked up, past Koth, past the base, into the atmosphere. “I’ll try, Captain. Does that satisfy you?”

“Do what you know is right. I guess even Jedi can’t do better than that.” Koth studied him. “Are you ever going to tell someone why?”

“The people who know why are dead, because of me. Or alive, and so distant I’ll probably never see them again. I…don’t know why I’m telling you this. Koth, I have been a force of destruction and the only, the only thing that makes me feel like I can still turn it around is scholarship. Here.”

“We all know we go into danger every day. And we can help each other but we can’t guarantee. There are no guarantees. That danger isn’t your fault. Believe me, I know.”

Tebbith looked into Koth’s dark eyes, his serious anxiety. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

* Wynston reached orbit and found himself staring at the navicomputer. The galaxy was split up thusly: where he had just come from, which he couldn’t return to until he had loosened the fossil of identity that had hardened around him in that place; any beautiful destination in the galaxy; and one stupid get-well program for a problem he didn’t…he didn’t…

He could stop, really, if this newfound coalition of do-gooders insisted. A medical program wasn’t necessary.

But it was structure, and something nobody would be allowed to interrupt him at. It might be enough for him to put his brain back together. If it made people stop bothering him about his drinking, so much the better.

He stared at the navicomputer. He could run away again. Change his name, change his job, ingratiate himself somewhere. He had done it so many times before.

But who would look after the Alliance with him gone?

That was the final direction. He trusted neither history nor his friends to successfully fend for themselves without him. And he couldn’t be there for them until he had figured out what to be in front of his newfound sister.

With that in mind, he set a course.

* Theron met Ruth for dinner. They went to the cafeteria. None of the team was there yet.

“Calline asked me a few pointed questions about Wynston’s ship,” said Theron. “She might bolt soon.”
“Didn’t she check in with you earlier today?”

“No. She told me she checked in with you.”

They looked at each other. Theron rolled his eyes first.

“Damn it,” said Ruth. “We’re hemorrhaging Chiss here.”

“You think she’s going to find him?”

“We know where he was supposed to go, don’t we? The center on Balmorra?”

“Yeah. He sounded pretty determined to do something not here for a while. Until she gives up and wanders off, most likely.”

“He would come back for Lana,” Ruth said decisively. “Maker, I hope he comes back for Lana.”

“She was alone for a long time. She’d survive.”

“Yes, but I’d prefer her to be comfortable.”

Theron cocked his head. “Really?”

“We have very different methods. But I don’t hate her.”

“So. We’re pitting the galaxy’s most storied hunter against its most well-hidden escape artist. Who wins?”

“Who wants it more?”

“I dunno.”

Theron looked down, then up. “Ever think about it? The idea that you can just walk away?”

Ruth frowned. “We can’t.”

“Simple as taking a ship and punching in coordinates that have nothing to do with the morning briefing. He’d do it. Maybe he is.”

“He won’t.” Wynston had belonged to the mission since the day she’d met him. Then again, the one thing that predated that for him was the family he’d left behind. Family. That one little thing. That one biggest thing. “Do you…I mean. If I left. For whatever reason, if I found a reason good enough, if I did, not just for a day but for good. Would you come with me?”

Theron’s eyes widened. It was to his credit, she thought determinedly, that he didn’t answer it right away. Theron was a careful man. He considered all the angles. Even the ones shaped like knives.

And it wasn’t fair of her to ask. She had already run once, not giving him the chance to go with her. She hadn’t asked him to. She probably would have stopped him if he tried. But that was for one errand. If it were ever an irrevocable question…

Still he was silent. She nodded. “Good man,” she said softly, and walked past him for the door. He had the right answer. The only conscionable one in a galaxy that needed this Alliance over the needs of any of its members.

He turned his head in profile as she was reaching the door. “Yes,” he said.
Something bright and warm stopped her in place. She turned back. “Then I’ll have to be really careful not to ask you to.”

He ran more than walked to take her by the waist and shoulders, bending to nuzzle one shoulder. “I love you, Ruth.”

She smiled in spite of herself and leaned her head against his. “Then everything’s okay.”

* 

Wynston did not report to the rehab center on Balmorra. If he was going to go through this ridiculous process to appease his colleagues, at least he would do it on his own terms.

That, plus some false credentials, got him into an exclusive facility on Dromund Kaas. Right back to the source. He’d been drinking since before he came to Dromund Kaas, but it was still his home, as much as any place in this galaxy was. The others didn’t understand that. He preferred it that way.

At least he would be free of surveillance for a week or two. Well, except for the city’s surveillance, but he had been bypassing that since he was eleven.

Of checkin and the first few hours’ orientation and friendly group activity, Wynston wanted to remember nothing. The one advantage he had here was a private room in the evening – with periodic checkups from the staff. Of course. It was like being back in Intelligence, only he didn’t respect this authority.

But he went through the stupid steps, partly because his colleagues did insist, and partly because he needed something to think about that wasn’t his little sister. Not so little now. He wondered whether his other siblings had ended up taller, too. That was a question that had never come up until he saw Calline shiny in her armor.

His room was acetic, fittingly enough. A low bench, a narrow bed with a mattress glued to both frame and wall – no place to hide anything. The secret agent in him was screaming. The only thing this place was missing was bars in the window.

Something on the outside of the window moved in the stifling dark. Wynston tensed, darted to stand against the wall next to the window, and started loosening his belt, his only available weapon. Something pushed the sash up and opened the pane.
There Once Was a Boy

Chapter Summary

Wynston has a visitor in rehab. Rylon asks about his background. Ruth and Lana practice. Wynston comes to a realization. (Wynston, Calline, Ruth, Rylon, Lana)

(cw alcoholism)

Wynston struck. He grabbed the stranger by its helmet, wrapped his belt around its exposed neck, and hauled it the rest of the way into the room. “Who is it this time?” he hissed, and, keeping one hand wrapped tightly in the belt, pulled the suspiciously familiar-looking helmet off.

Calline raised both gloved hands to her neck, scrabbling at the belt. Wynston huffed out a breath and loosened his grip. “Bloody hell, woman, how did you get here?”

She coughed a few times. Then she grinned. “I’m Mandalorian. Mandalorians hunt.”

“Have you lost your mind? I told you I’d be back.”

“I want to talk now.”

“If I were sober I’d get a rematch and win,” he growled. Something floated to mind, the one useful piece of information in an otherwise miserable day. “Wait a minute. I am sober.”

Calline hooked her fingers under his belt before he could choke her again. He let go and settled for punching her. Crazy woman. Tracking him down across the galaxy for who knew what employer. She punched him back, hard. He grabbed her shoulders, lifted, slammed them. He could eventually beat her agenda out of her, or else get her to leave him alone. She grunted and rolled. He slithered to one side, preventing the pin, and launched both feet at her. A Mandalorian. A hired killer. She grunted again. Growling now he went for the clasps of her breastplate. On the floor scrabbling at his sister’s clothing wasn’t exactly what he had envisioned for himself, ever, but he needed to eliminate her advantage any way he could. He would have killed for some proper tools, a stim, anything, but as it was he had only his hands and a very good knowledge of weak points.

“Hey,” she squeaked, and fended his hands off. “Bad.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, “plan B.” He stood up and hauled her with him. Then he gave her his best right cross. She reeled and came back. He intercepted one arm, pivoted, seized the other, carried her with her own momentum to the wall over the bench. She impacted, yelped, and dropped to the bench itself. He pressed his forearm to her throat and leaned, waiting for her to give up. Her wrists clicked. Something shot out of both armored bracers and gleamed. He shifted his grip to her elbows and pinned her, rattling both wrists against the wall in the hopes of damaging her tools. Without those she was as good as done. She wriggled and only succeeded in bumping her head against the block wall.

“Ow,” she said.

“Yield,” he said.
Knock Knock, the door said.

Wynston straightened at once. He grabbed Calline’s helmet, handed it to her, and watched her vault out the open window. He closed it behind her and whirled.

The door opened. “Mr. Amun?” The orderly – for orderly it was – leaned in. “What’s going on?”

He waved his hand as if stung on the knuckles. “Sorry. I was frustrated.”

“A very common reaction, especially at first. But try not to take it out on the walls. Would you like to-”

“No,” said Wynston. “I’ll just sleep now.”

“Fine.” The orderly reached in to turn out the lights. “Good night now, Mr. Amun.”

The window shook and slid open. While Wynston sat on the edge of the bed, Calline launched herself in feet-first and came to a surprisingly quiet landing. She flipped a switch on her breastplate to turn on a glaring light. “Frustrated?” she said dryly.

“Truthful, if you’ll recall.”

Calline snorted. Then she laughed. It was the same self-restrained but never self-silenced laugh she had given so easily twenty-five years ago. He joined with her. And once he started he had a lot of trouble stopping. He laughed until his sides ached and Calline, gasping, wiped tears from her eyes.

“Stars,” he said, “don’t ever make me do that again. Who sent you? Really?”

She sat beside him. “Torian sent me to your operation. I followed you for me. Why can’t you believe that?”

What an innocent question. “Because nobody wants me.” Not the real him, the shapeshifter, the jack of all possible trades. Not since he had broken off from Intelligence. Except for… “Not unless they need a job done.”

“I get that. Believe me.”

That was far too bleak a statement for a woman. Or for himself, it occurred to him, though it was a little late now. “Voices down,” he warned. “Tell me what’s happened. All of it. How’s Caevarl?”

“Of course you ask for her,” whispered Calline. “Cae and I always knew.”

“Cae and you were never the brightest ones.” Calline slapped his arm, hard. Wynston chuckled. “So you went to the stars to look for me.”

Calline kicked her toes out and let her calves bang back against the frame, childlike and comfortable. “Well…yeah.”

*

Calline checked her chrono. “Okay, it’s been three hours talking about me. Your turn.”

“About you?” said Wynston in that slightly affected drawl. “About your family, the old planet, everything. That’s a lot to cover.”

He always did like changing the subject. “Your turn.”
“You’ve caught me at a bad time, *bot’uhn*.” He insisted on using Basic except for that one little endearment. It was probably the longest Basic conversation she’d ever had since leaving their little droid factory just outside the border of Chiss space. “After I’ve sorted this out I’ll answer your questions.”

“Yeah? What’re you sorting?”

He hesitated. “Habits. My associates don’t like seeing me indulging, so here I am.”

“Do you want to stop?”

There wasn’t much light for reading his expression. “You’ve caught me at a bad time, *bot’uhn.*”

“He hesitated. “Habits. My associates don’t like seeing me indulging, so here I am.”

“Fine.” She kicked the air again and let her legs swing. She had imagined meeting her big brother a lot of ways over the last twenty-five years. Tangled up in the conspiracy of a lifetime and then running away from it to roll himself into a basket case…wasn’t one of them. “Can you come back home after?”

“That would be impossible. I have enemies. If you associate yourself with me you’re putting yourself in danger.”

“I’m not afraid.”

A little pause, an exhalation shaped like a smile. “You can, evidently, handle yourself. But I’d rather not disturb the others.” Very suddenly he stood. “Well. I’ve got another day of getting worked over and cajoled to admit that I have a problem. It’s tedious work, but apparently someone’s got to do it.”

“I remember. Before.” When they were kids and their father’s cabinet wasn’t too well locked. “You hid it pretty well. Listen, if you want to stop…that’s only a good thing.”

Wynston’s voice was strained. Maybe he hadn’t expected to get caught. But in a house of eight there were no secrets, not even for him. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said.

She stood, too, and doused the light in her breastplate. The diffuse light of a night-damped city filtered through the window over the two of them. “So, *hsin’bo.* Same time tomorrow night?”

Wynston chuckled. “If they leave me be.” And he reached up and hugged her, hard. She hugged him back. He had always been small and wiry; it was startling to know that somewhere along the line she had grown past him. Twenty-five years was a lot of space to show up in the middle of an embrace.

She slipped out the little sticky discs she had used for climbing, and crept out the window. She had to let this crazy wonderful conversation stop somewhere, at least for today. It was a hunt well done.

*It was well past three, and no one broke the curfew but for a few robed Sith skulking. They didn’t need to skulk, but they seemed proud of their practice, so Calline didn’t fight it. She cut a striking figure in contrast: tall, armored, her outline worried by a dozen weapons and utility devices. She walked with her helmet on and her head held high. Even a Chiss could be confident in the Empire if she had the right blend of sponsorship and guts. Even a Chiss sometimes got a good ending.*

She broke stride to pump one fist, hard. Anyone close enough would have heard a “Yes!”, and
would not have received further explanation.

* 

“Mom?” said Rylon.

“Yes?” She hadn’t really been reading anyway, just watching him at his console. It was late.

“Do I have a birthday?”

The words left an exit wound. “Of course you do, Rylon. You’ve always had a birthday.”

“We just had New Year’s. Everybody was supposed to celebrate being a year older. Some of the kids from off planet had birthdays but we weren’t supposed to do anything.”

“Your birthday is in only a couple of weeks. You’re going to be ten.”

“Will Father be there?”

“We can certainly ask him.”

Rylon slouched and pulled his knees to his chin. “How come you’re crying?”

So many reasons. So many moments. “Because they didn’t even let you have a birthday. I came as soon as I could.”

“I know.” Rylon considered. “Are there cakes and stuff?”

“As much cake as you can eat. You’ll have everything.”

“Oh.” He went back to his reading.

Minutes later, when Ruth was thinking about sleep, he stood. “Thanks,” he said, indicating nothing in particular, and went to his room.

* 

“One hour,” said Calline. “Your turn.”

“You weren’t done telling me about Cae.”

“Caevarl can wait. She’s been waiting for twenty-five years. Your turn.”

Wynston sighed. His body was aching from something that might be withdrawal and something that might be concentrated resentment at the repetitiveness of rehab’s therapy. “Fine. One story. But that’s all you’re getting tonight. I’m a sick man.”

Calline crossed her legs up on his narrow bed. “Okay, *hsin’bo*.”

The first twenty or so stories that sprang to mind were about women. Wynston wasn’t sure his sister would react well. Come to think of it, it had been a long time since he had spoken to a woman he categorically couldn’t flirt with. It made him nervous, which made him want a drink. He shook that off.

“Once upon a time,” he said, “I worked for Imperial Intelligence.”

Calline stiffened. “Really?”
“Yes. You saw the same propaganda I did.” She looked as thrilled to hear it as he had felt when she said she was a Mandalorian. Everyone had their standards. “It seemed like a good cause, and I wasn’t physically suited to the military. I thought I could make a difference. I was right.”

“Do you still work for them?”

He opened his mouth. He stopped. He laughed. “You’re trying to maneuver me into a very, very long story, and it’s not going to work.”

“So you don’t work for them.”

“Have you worked for them?”

“Weaseling.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you about my supervisor. She had a title, everyone in Intelligence did. I was a Cipher, eventually. She was a Watcher.”

“Sounds like a desk job.”

“A surprisingly active one. She researched my missions, gave me the necessary information to carry them out, and provided remote support while I was in the field. Then at the end I would come back, she would tell me everything I did wrong, I would flirt with her some more, she would be disgusted some more, and our careers sailed on. She was Human, almost everyone in Intelligence was. I was quite thoroughly beneath her. But we worked well together.” Calline was just watching, eyes dim in the low light. “Once upon a time an adversary hurt her, badly. To where she was unable to speak. I’m no doctor and no psychologist, nor even much of a bodyguard; there was nothing I could do…except find who did it, and disable them. Which I did. That was a very busy weekend. And I heartily disliked doing it without her briefing. And without the flirting. And the rejection. It was all part of the workflow by then. My point is, I made a few friends on the way. Imperial Intelligence isn’t the cold monolith it makes itself out to be, not entirely.”

“You thought you were beneath her because she was Human.”

“Well, yes.”

“No. Intelligence sounds pretty much exactly as cold as it makes itself out to be.” She shifted in the dark, and he saw a strip of light crossing the scar on her face. “I may just be hired muscle, but nobody tells me I’m beneath them. Not to my face.”

“I had the full resources of Imperial Intelligence at my back. I don’t need pride past that.”

“I don’t get that.” She cleared her throat. “But it works for you, I guess. Are you going to kick me out now?”

“I do require sleep at some point in this cycle.”

“Fine. G’night, hsin’bo. Anybody tries to make you feel less than, I’ll sock ‘em one.”

“Good night, bot’uhm.” And, because it would make her happy, “I hold and you punch.”

* 

“Ruth. A word?”

Ruth fell naturally into Lana’s wake. Not many people made that so easy. “What is it?” she said.
Lana stepped into the office off the operations center. “I need to ask a favor.”

They had worked since Ruth’s desertion and Lana’s maiming. They had worked since Lana had made Ruth a bargaining chip. But they hadn’t had dealings in private. “What is it?”

“The private sparring room. One hour.” She frowned. “I need to practice.”

Ruth has no idea what that would entail, but she was willing to help. She changed clothes and met her blonde counterpart in the sparring room. Training swords were lined up along one edge of the field. Lana, plain in green, stalked over and picked one out. Her metal hand gleamed. Ruth wondered whether she would cover it in skin. Probably, before going undercover. But not yet.

“Did you hear from Scythia’s people?” said Ruth.

“That Zakuulian outpost didn’t stand a chance. It didn’t draw Arcann’s attention, but it’ll slow them down. This arrangement of ours just might work out.”

Ruth selected a blade; just one for today. She started pacing a wide circle with Lana walking on the other side.

“How are you?” said Ruth.

“We’re going to find out,” said Lana, spinning her weapon in a tight arc. Then, with mesmerizing smoothness and no particular hurry, she started closing the distance.

Ruth met her halfway with a leap. Their first strike shivered through her arms. Well, Lana wasn’t lacking for strength. Had she ever?

Ruth tapped, testing. Lana’s grip was good. Lana swung a counterattack nothing short of savage, driving Ruth back under a mad flurry, and landed a hard hit on Ruth’s arm.

Right. She was a convalescent, not a novice. There were important differences.

“Blood?” said Lana.

“Blood,” said Ruth. “Again?”

“Yes.” Lana brought her guard up. Ruth darted in, seeking now more precise work, favoring speed over power. Lana deftly blocked and parried. If Ruth’s hallmark was economy, Lana’s was grace, a sense that every motion was inevitable and inevitably successful. If Ruth were in the habit of being intimidated, she would find it frightening.

For the space of ten or twelve swings they traded evenly, neither giving ground, both flowing in and out of textbook forms and never letting one get too predictable. Lana’s sudden surge of power forced Ruth into an awkward lurch. She came up swinging. A few hard strikes, while Ruth wondered about the artificial hand’s endurance. She was trying not to hit it.

But an opening came up, and she took it. One staccato tap to move Lana’s sword aside; one sharp swing and Ruth had the feeling of impact on flesh. Or close to it. She froze in place, waiting for the acknowledgement.

Lana locked eyes and smiled, not pleasantly. “No blood there,” she said. “It doesn’t even hurt.” She dipped her hand and thrust, driving her blade into Ruth’s sternum.

Ruth fell back a step. “Happy?” she said tensely.
“Better informed,” said Lana, and subsided. “This is good. It’s been very frustrating in solo forms. Something still seems wrong.”

“Any time you need to stab me. If it helps.”

“Are we even?” said Lana.

“Is that what this is about?”

“Isn’t it?”

“I can go all out or get out of command. There’s no middle ground.”

“You’ll have me at your shoulder.”

“I’m counting on that. Can we just get something to eat?”

Lana raised her eyebrows. “Well. I don’t see why not.”

*

Wynston was sitting in the dark. If he’d had his holo he would have been calling Lana. Or Calline. Or somebody. He would lie to them about how he was doing, and that would make him feel better.

Right on cue the window rattled. Calline opened up and let herself in. She wasn’t wearing armor today. Just a sweater sprinkled with flowers and inoffensive dark pants. It made her look older, strangely.

“Hi,” she said.

He looked around for words and didn’t find any good ones.

“Hsin’bo? What’s wrong?”

“I have a problem,” he said. “And I know these people are paid to make me think I have a problem and then fix it, but they had a justified argument here. And all this time I have been making excuses and arranging my life around the next drink. And I didn’t even see it. And I can’t talk tonight, Calline. That’s the only story I have. I wanted you away from here so I could sort myself out before you had to see me. But you’re always creeping in where you’re not supposed to. I’m just sorry you had to see this.”

She stepped away from the window. She came to the bed and sat beside him. She touched his shoulder, then slid her arm around him and pulled him against her. “It’s okay,” she told his hair.

“It’s really not.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s going to be okay.”

“There once was a boy,” he said in a cracking voice, “who worked in the mines. It was loud, and dark, and disorienting, and thankless. And when he came upstairs he would steal from his father’s cabinet. It tasted good and it made things a little easier. And I have never, in my life, let myself stray too far from somebody’s cabinet.”

She nodded. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Stop being optimistic.”
She kissed his hair. “You’re going to be okay.”

“I liked it better when I was protecting you.”

“I know. We’ll get back to that and I’ll get in some trouble so you can fix it. But first we get you straight here.”

“You don’t have to come back.”

“There’s still a lot we need to talk about. Just not right now.” She squeezed him. “You’re going to be okay.”

Wynston hadn’t cried, genuinely cried, in a long time, and he wasn’t going to start now. He controlled his breathing. It was the only thing he had power over.

*

Ruth felt it like a knife in her gut. She had to excuse herself from dinner and go to her quarters to start sorting out what it meant.

Twice before she had been summoned to planets for reasons beyond her understanding, and Wynston had been there, hurt and in need. This had to be another.

She found Lana in the office off ops. “Lana,” she said. “It’s Wynston.”

Lana’s lips thinned. “I suppose I shouldn’t ask how you know that.”

“The link was accidental. But it’s guided me on one or two occasions. He’s hurting, Lana.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. I can barely feel my own chest for the awareness there. But he needs to stay where he is. In rehab. No matter how much it hurts.”

“We can take him home. He’ll behave.”

“For as long as he can. And then he’ll slide back. He needs to do this, Ruth. We can’t interrupt.”

“He needs us!”

“Ruth. Do you trust him?”

“With my life.”

“Yes. But do you trust him with his?”

Ruth thought of five things to say at once and, strangely, couldn’t get a grip on any of them. She picked her jaw up off the floor.

“I’m tired of him putting that flask between himself and everyone,” said Lana. “And I think on some level he’s tired of it, too.” She came closer and set her hand on Ruth’s shoulder. “He’ll come home, and he’ll come home better off than he started.”

Ruth’s voice broke. “I want to save him.”

Lana half smiled. “Don’t we all?”
Wynston handed Calline a cupcake. “Saved this for you.”

“Aw.” She accepted it and, mercifully, didn’t ask about the horrific group therapy session he had liberated it from. Rehab was proving to be a trial almost beyond endurance, specifically designed to cut him off from his favorite way of dealing with trials. But none of that mattered after curfew. His little sister was here. She was in a fitted turtleneck, a pale green contrast to her dark blue skin, and looked casual apart from the utility belt. “Thanks.”

“I have a serious question for you,” said Wynston.

She bit into the frosting but raised attentive eyebrows.

“Really. Who sent you?”

“Mm.” She chewed. “This again? Me. I did. Torian told me about your Alliance and I wanted to help. And then you were there.”

“It’s nothing personal, I promise I won’t take it out on you. I just want to trace the strings.”

Calline scowled. She touched her chest. She leaned over and touched his. “There.”

Time to move on, before he had to think too much about what she meant. “So what do you do when you’re not being angelic here? How did you spend your day?”

“Talked to a guy in town,” she said, sitting on the narrow bed beside him. “Some Sith acolytes were playing a game. Dart marking people for the others to kill.”

“Ah. Dromund Kaas, how I missed you.” It still felt like home. Days like this, he’d be damned if he knew why. “You didn’t go up against them, did you?”

“Nah. Just got their dart gun. Marked a few other Sith.” She was grinning.

Wynston waited a moment for her to stop looking so pleased. She didn’t. “Bloody hell, woman, you can’t just go around doing that!”

“What? They’re Sith.”

“Not every Sith is a monster. You recall meeting Ruth, about my height, short brown hair, and Lana, taller, blonde, both Human? Sith lords. They got their start on Dromund Kaas. They’re two
of the best people I’ve ever known.”

Calline shook her head. “So, two in the galaxy. Odds are still good I did the right thing.”

“You want a story? Some years ago I was called in by what remained of Imperial Intelligence. I was told by people I trusted that it was very important. It was a conspiracy that had already gotten hundreds of Imperials killed. My contact talked me through the operation – my own Watcher, in a way. And she took the field with me when the time came. She put her life on the line next to mine because that is what had to be done. Not as my commander. As my comrade. That woman was Lana Beniko. I went my own way after that – I was building some work outside Imperial Intelligence, where she was staying – but when I signed onto the Alliance and found out she was directing it, I knew we were in good hands. Because she and Ruth were there, and I trust their judgment. I trust that they don’t think they’re the queens of the galaxy.”

“She’ll be back there when we get back.”

“Yes. I meant it when I said she’d be your friend if you let her.”

“Yeah,” said Calline.

This was a brand of diplomacy he didn’t have the tools for. Not here, not knowing only a few hours’ worth of talk about the woman beside him. So he moved on. “Who have you told about me being here?”

“Nobody. I didn’t think you wanted me to.”

His chest loosened a little. “Goodness. You guessed correctly.” He leaned over, touching his shoulder to hers. “Can I use your holo?”

“Where did they put yours?”

“Well, I gave them a decoy to confiscate at the door. There’s a second one on the grounds, I just haven’t had time to get to it.”

“Aw. You could be doing that right now.”

“Or I could use yours.”

“Why?”

“To tell Lana I’m all right.”

“Okay. Why?”

“Because I didn’t tell anyone I’m coming here. I wanted to be sure it would come to something before I got anyone’s hopes up.”

“Okay.” Calline shook a wavy lock of dark, dark blue hair back from her face. She was still round-cheeked, still young around the edges. It was strange. It was nice. “You…she…?”

“Ah,” he said. She deserved to know. “In so many words, yes.”

Calline worried her lip between her teeth. “Do you like getting stepped on?”

“No. That’s how she and I get along so well.” Wynston stretched and leaned forward. “Torian trusts her. Do you trust him?”
“Torian’s a trusting guy,” said Calline. “Don’t tell him I said it like that.”

“I hold these conversations in confidence. You know that.”

She smiled a little. “I don’t know anything, hsin’bo. But it’s nice to hear.”

“I’m not going to convince you of the existence of good Sith tonight.”

“No.”

“Am I going to convince you to hand me that holo for three minutes?”

“Well…you did give me a cupcake.” She unclipped her holo and handed it to him. He turned it over once and started entering manual routing commands.

“Hm?”

“I’m making sure she can’t trace it. Things are going well. I want them to continue going well without an…without more of an audience.”

“She won’t be mad? That you drop a line and vanish?”

“We’ve both been secret agents. She’ll understand.”

“Uh-huh.”

He made the message short. He sent via an unused holofrequency that would bounce it to a few different stops before coming back to Odessen. Two or three steps he was pretty sure she would crack. The others might take her a few days, which was all he needed.

Calline was eyeing him uneasily. “You trust her?”

“I do.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know your name?”

Wynston stayed relaxed. It took some doing. “It’s not that simple.”

“Seems pretty simple to me.”

“If you’re very lucky, I’ll tell you that story before this is done.”

“Which one?”

“The one about what happened to your big brother. You already know most of it, you just don’t know you know it.” He handed the holo back. “Thank you, Calline. Come back tomorrow.”

She hesitated, then stood. “Good night, big brother.” And, tall and stealthy, she swung out of the window, planted her hands and feet with their sticky disks, and climbed down into the night of Dromund Kaas. Wynston shut the window after her and lay down, feeling almost comfortable.

*
The disappearance was killing Lana, and there was nothing Theron could do.

“You should talk to Torian,” he said. “That Calline doesn’t just vanish. If she’s after somebody, she’ll bring him back.”

“Do you think I want to see him come home in carbonite because that’s the only way they can keep him from bolting again? Are those really circumstances you think would make me feel better?”

“She’s not taking him back in carbonite,” said Theron. “I think.” He didn’t dislike Wynston but he was rapidly becoming ready to. “If nothing else, he left everything he owns here.”

“One shelf and a stocked bar,” said Lana. “I’ve been to his quarters. He left next to nothing there.”

“We could take the bar out.”

Lana frowned. She eyed the middle distance. “You’re right,” she said. “We could.”

Her holo beeped on their way to get a crowbar. Theron watched, concerned, but the message was text only and Lana read it fast. “Oh,” she said.

“What news?”

Her voice was the especially flat kind of calm that indicated she probably wasn’t. “Wynston’s all right. He went to an alternate facility, probably just to be contrary. He says he doesn’t have a return date yet, but he’s working.” She squeezed her eyes shut, then looked at Theron. “There you have it.”

“That’s good. If he was going to run, he wouldn’t bother with the commentary.”

“I know.” Lana managed a small smile. “I know.”

“Want to dismantle his minibar anyway?”

She opened the utility closet and looked around. “I’m doing this for his own good.”

* 

Rylon spent most of Quinn’s shifts on a corner of the bridge, going through educational programs. He looked up when Quinn started walking out.

“Father?” He trotted to keep up. “Where are you going?”

Quinn set his jaw, but he slowed a tiny bit. “There has been an issue with the engines,” he said after a while. “The repair crew is not updating at a satisfactory rate.”

“What’s wrong with the engines?”

“Sensors indicated a three point two percent reduction in efficiency beginning forty-five minutes ago.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. There are several possible explanations with root causes ranging from lapses in maintenance to local spatial disturbances to sabotage.”

“Can we get away if we had to jump now?”
“What?” he said brusquely. “Yes. This is a question of efficiency, not capability.” Quinn seemed to notice something in the silence. “That is, we can do everything we normally do, it’s just going to take more energy and resources than it should.”

“Where’s the energy come from? I thought the engines were the energy.”

If people smiled to see the smaller mirror image quickstepping with a stream of questions, well, none of them did it where Quinn could see.

*

“It’s so quiet,” said Ruth.

“I know,” said Theron. “And you haven’t exactly been yelling down the hallways the last few days.”

“I know,” she said. She always looked pale and she looked pale here. “Did we break the Alliance?”

The bedroom was warmly lit, cluttered with more little mementoes than either had had a year ago. Theron wrapped his arm comfortably around her. “No,” he said. “Some days the galaxy-fixing requires a little more field work, that’s all.” He kissed her ear. “You don’t have to worry, babe. Everybody’s where they’re supposed to be. Well, except Rylon. But he’ll be home soon.”

Ruth sat rigid and still. Hers was a lean hardness but it melted when he was doing his job right. Just…not now. “Theron, I need you to understand something.”

“Yeah?”

“I am happy.” She took his hand and raised it, tracing the outlines of his fingers, drawing him in to kiss his palm. “I lose allies, and, and friends, and I live in a galaxy where nothing is safe unless I’m there to fight for it, and this place gets emptier and emptier because of things I did or things I failed to prevent…” She shook her head hard. “And I’m happy. Because you’re here. We can do everything else from there.”

“Damn right.”

Finally she started to soften into him. “Did you have a dossier on me?”

This probably related, somehow. “Me? No. My employers? Yes. They managed to hyperfocus on a series of details that…” he trailed his hand down her side…”completely failed to prepare me for you.”

“Have you updated it with what you’ve learned?”

“Nah.” He pulled her closer. “This is for me.”

It was enough.

*

“Sana-Rae hasn’t seen me do anything in weeks,” said Larr Gith. She appeared to be moping about the absence of Mystic visions. “She seems happy about the Interpreter, though, so, kudos to me.”

Tebbith looked up from his holocron. “Yes,” he said gently, “kudos.”
“You’ve improved the place,” Larr Gith continued, waving in the direction of two circles of cushy chairs. People were sitting, reading or watching quiet holos. The burgeoning resources of the Alliance were starting to result in a library even a Jedi could be proud of. “Hell, I believe at least three of those people are actually reading.”

“Yes, Master Larr, thank you for that.” Tebith smiled. “Anything more than zero is worth it.”

“How come you turned out so perfect and I turned out so…well, perfect? I mean, you, you’ve got the Jedi thing down.”

“I spent all my life in the Order.”

“Well, so did I.”

“Well, I spent more of it. I do have a few years on you.”

“And they did shove me out the door to start saving the world when I was fifteen. So maybe a difference in experience there.”

“Master Larr,” Tebith said, very seriously.

“Teb?” she said innocently.

“You are, in your own inimitable way, attempting to cheer me up.”

“It’s just…you’ve been all but locked in here ever since it happened. Teb, nobody blames you for what happened with Arcann. You did your best, just like the rest of us.”

“Right. And my sole ally in that fight was maimed.”

“You realize you’re more upset about this than she is.”

“Master Larr, please…”

“Do you want to hear about screwing up a fight against the big bad? Really, really badly? Like, actually working for the bad guy badly?”

“You are the last person in the galaxy to know about that.”

“Did they ever tell you what happened to—”

From the doorway Lana cleared her throat.


“Master Tebith,” she said briskly. “Please, there’s no need to apologize. We’re starting to get requests in from our allies. You, by name. Correspondence only. I was hoping you could stop by ops and help us prioritize.”

Tebith was staring at her metallic hand. “I didn’t, I’m not much of a…Lord Beniko, are you sure?”

Lana set her fists on her hips and fixed him with that corrupt yellow stare. “Would I let you keep this facility if I wasn’t sure about you?”

“You know, I was going to share hard-earned wisdom here,” said Larr Gith. “It was about a
harrowing experience. Very deep stuff.”

Lana eyed her. “Do it in ops. We’ve got the space.”

* 

“Calline,” said Wynston. “No cupcakes. Sorry.”

Calline shut the window and tiptoed in her heavy boots to the hard narrow bed to sit beside him. “You okay? When Cerruel has that look he usually goes down to cheat at dejarik for a few hours.”

“I’m fine,” said Wynston. He did look unhappy, but he was covering, schooling every familiar feature to a steadiness that might have fooled someone who hadn’t been there for every day of those features’ development. He was wearing clothes that would be considered moderately fashionable in the city outside, all neat, not a thread out of place. His dark hair, always straighter than hers, was combed to comparable perfection. “Wholesome activities from dawn ‘til dusk,” he said in that pleasantly inflected voice, “it’s very good for me. They’re trying to train me to build up a life and social graces without alcohol in the middle of them. It’s not a lot of raw material to go on.”

“So what do you want to be when they’re done?”

“Hm?”

“What do you want to be. With the built-up alcohol-free life.”

“I don’t think they asked me.”

“I’m asking.”

Wynston smiled. He stopped smiling. He leaned back and frowned thoughtfully. “Given the choice? I want to be me as I was. After I came to the Empire. Before Intelligence went wrong. After I learned what I won’t compromise for. But before I ever fell for that…” he rolled his eyes…”all right, there is no point in time where I was what I want to be. Maybe this is my chance to fix that.”

“Tell me about that guy. Wynston.”

“Wynston, as recently amended to be new and improved?” He smiled, more steadily this time. “He’s witty. Urbane. Devastatingly charming.”

“Yeah?”

“Well-informed, resourceful, fit, there’s no excuse to let that down.”

“Sounds fair.”

“Rational, relevant, reliable…I know you have no reason to believe me, but reliability is very important to me.”

For someone, somewhere. Not for her. That was the lesson he had taught twenty-five years ago. Not her…well, not yet. She could hope. “Okay.”

He squinted thoughtfully at her. “Kind. Call me silly.”

“No.” She remembered the boy who took off his own scarf to wrap the last chink of her ill-fitting
coat before they went up to the surface.

“I suppose that’s most of it,” he said lightly. “It doesn’t sound so difficult, laid out like that.”

“You know you always were all those things.” He was going to deny it and she didn’t want to hear him fighting. “Remember trying it all on for the first time? The persona, I mean. I was so excited when I went out there to get a job as a guard. I was going to be the toughest customer in the Outer Rim.”

“My sister the tough. Obviously you made it work for you.”

“Yeah. People didn’t take me seriously until I got better with a blaster. But I got there.”

“All the way to Mandalore.”

“All the way to Mandalore.”

“You’re happy with it?”

Calline considered. “Yeah.”

He had a sly little smile that always seemed a little affected. And then he had a crooked sort of smile that came out at times she couldn’t yet predict. “Good.”

“Tell me a story?”

“I just did.”

“That one’s not even finished yet. Tell me what happened to my brother. Why did Wynston win?”

“Ah. He’s me, bot’uhn. He was always me.”

“Tell me.”

“I would rather do this over drinks.” He grimaced. “All right. So I don’t have any. Let’s see about this. This…goes back. To the old country. Rentor. Home of icebergs full of rocks, and rocks full of mine shafts, and mine shafts full of Chiss of the social class that no one will miss. You never worked in the mines.”

“I was getting old enough.”

“Caeverl didn’t start until she was ten. They wouldn’t have made you, not until then. I was just fortunate enough to be a boy. Bot’uhn, you must understand. Those mines were harsh teachers. It was dark, and hot, and very constricted where they sent me crawling to plant equipment. Order, regulations, teamwork, obedience. You keep the mine shaft clear and correctly supported, or people die. You keep fires from breaking out, or people die. You keep the equipment and gas sensors working, or people die. You prioritize doing the job over casting blame when accidents and mistakes happen, or people die. Some days people die anyway.” He paused, clasping his hands tightly. “At the same time, you learn that the quota doesn’t lessen any just because things went wrong or someone around you failed or you’re hurt. There are consequences for slowing down. The mission goes on; you keep moving. And you are always ready to work in the morning.”

“Hsin’bo,” she said quietly. “We got out of there.”
“It didn’t seem like it. Yes, we moved, to Atalan, to new work. But in their heads Mimma and Pippa never left those mines. It showed in their expectations. Their discipline. Pippa always thought I was a starry-eyed layabout. And Mimma kept thinking I was going to disappear like our elder brother did.”

“Our elder brother died.”

“And she kept watching me, agonizing over every corner on every street we walked. It was exhausting. I couldn’t be Csenndal. I didn’t want to be. She had five children left. Why did I have to be the one towing his ghost?”

“Hsin’bo!”

“You asked. I…never said it that way before. Calline, the droid factory wasn’t a real change. To me that planet was just the mines with a little soap scrub on them. If I left with you or Caevarl or the boys again, the mines would just follow. I had to make a clean break. I had to go somewhere where, if I’m to be sent into darkness, it’s for a cause better than a ledger sheet. Which is where the Empire came in. You saw the posters all over town. The propaganda on the holo – remember how we would practice our Basic from the holodramas?”

“You were so slow. Better at memorizing speeches, but I picked up the rules so much faster.”

“Yes, well, my supervisors were never thrilled with my progress in language, either. But they didn’t know that about me yet.”

“We would talk about going to all these different worlds. We would see everything.” Just like she did…without him. Just like he did without her.

“I know,” he said. “But when the time came I went alone.” He rushed past that. “I already knew I would never make it in the military, which is where most of the Imperial material we saw was urging. But I knew I wanted to do something. This Empire, this thing so much larger and more powerful than the Ascendancy, this coalition of the victorious…where intelligence and ambition were rewarded. To be frank I think anyone who didn’t ask me to work with industrial machinery would’ve had my attention. I wanted to work with people. I wanted to see things. Other planets. Other species.”

“Just not me.”

He had the grace to look chastened. “There are two things I regret about leaving Atalan. One was you, and the other was Caevarl. But I learned a long time ago that you can’t get rid of the past without getting rid of the past.”

“And Nyss?”

Wynston flinched. “There’s a name I could have done without hearing.” He rocked back and forth, staring at the floor. “I just…didn’t. Leaving town, tossing my holo, changing my name, and never coming back again seemed like a reasonable solution.”

“Huh.” He sounded so completely serious. “Nobody ever gets to make fun of my love life again.”

“But that was only the last strike among many. Your brother hopped ship off Atalan. Wynston the alien disembarked onto Dromund Kaas. He was everything I promised. He had a drink for courage and walked into a recruitment office.”

“And never looked back.”
“No,” he said softly. “It must seem that way.” For the first time he actually looked her in the eye, and then studied the rest of her face. “What is it, bot’uhn?”

She sniffled and kicked herself for it. “If I get angry at you, you’re just going to disappear again. I have to behave or else you’ll shake me out of your life and I’ll never catch you again.”

“You can get angry at me,” he said. “No point in my being this honest if you can’t be.”

“Okay.” She hesitated. He waited attentively. “You know what I think? I think I finally, finally have your reasons for leaving. And you know what? They were shitty reasons. I idolized you, I needed you, and you left me because you were scared of some dark hole we were already out of. You know Mimma and Pippa think you’re dead? It’s easier than holding out hope. The boys hardly even remember you. It was just Caevarl and me who never gave up. And Mimma needed her around the house, she couldn’t come with me. So it was just me. You understand that? Just me, not knowing if you were dead or alive, not knowing if you’d already made it to the stars and just didn’t feel like sharing it with me.”

There was something pleading in his eyes. “Calline, I never-”

“Listen!” It was the traditional chant of a Chiss folk tale. It was also an effective silencer. She sobbed and pressed on. “I learned to pilot a ship by myself, with a manual I could barely read, because you weren’t there to figure it out with me. I paid somebody to teach me to shoot, because our dart fights all over the living room weren’t good enough for the real world. They stopped me in customs on Dromund Kaas the first time for ten hours. I was alone in a holding cell without so much as pocket lint to call my own. I was terrified. And you weren’t there to talk us out of it. Every, stupid, step I took away from Atalan should’ve been an adventure with you. And it wasn’t. Because you decided, by yourself, that that’s the way you wanted it to be.”

“I thought of you. I hoped for you.”

“But you never looked for me.” She stood. “I can’t do this. Thanks for your honesty. Thanks for answering so, many questions. And you know what? I get it. I get that Wynston was an only child.”

“Don’t say that, I never meant-”

“Have fun in rehab. I really hope you feel better. You should have self-reliance down to an art by now.” She opened the window.

“Wait!” He started up as well, with something like fear in his ever-mysterious eyes. “Will I see you again?”

“Why don’t you wonder for once?” She activated her climbing pads and crawled out into the stifling night.

She hurried back through the sullen city, easily creeping around the patrols. These conversations with Wynston, so wordy, so foreign, they were too much. She had said too much. And, dammit, so had he. She made it to the grubby little hostel and cried herself to sleep.

*  

Ruth stood up straight and reminded herself she was a highly ranked Sith lord. “Vette,” she said. “How’s, er, business?”

“Keeping me busy,” said Vette. “Have a seat.” She gestured to the bar stool beside her.
“Really?” said Ruth, but she sat, too, promptly. “I was just thinking, it’s been a while, and, I was wondering…”

“Wow. Haven’t seen you this tongue-tied since Quinn used the word ‘desire’ in a sentence.”

“Oh that’s not fair.”

Vette grinned. “What’s the big request?”

“Some of your time? Cards. Just a few stupid rounds of cards. Bring your people if you want.”

“No,” said Vette. “One on one will do.”

“Does this mean the Outlander isn’t on your bad list?”

“It means, she might get out. Come on. Have a drink with me if that doesn’t freak you out too much.”

“Vette, I’d love to.”

Lana looked up from her console. “With Wynston?”

“Didn’t say.” Torian’s every line spoke eagerness. She went with him to the boardwalk leading out to the landing pads.

Calline, Grand Champion of the Great Hunt, was alone. She wore full armor with her T-visored helmet under her arm. Torian slowed, grinning like an idiot. She shot him a warm smile. Lana filed the relationship away for future use. If there was one thing Torian was unhinged about it was his brothers in arms. And sister. And that might be returned. Good to know.

Calline’s smile vanished when she turned to Lana. “I do two things,” she said in accented Basic. “I find people. And I bring them in. So point me.”

Hello, thought Lana, nice to have the chance to talk, welcome to Odessen, please, make yourself comfortable, is there anything we can do to make you feel at home? Lana discarded the spiel. The Chiss plainly wasn’t interested.

“How is Wynston?” she said.

Calline’s face clouded further. “Fine.”

But not with the favor of his sister. “I see. Thank you.” She cleared her throat. “Please, come with me. I’ll show you through the ops center. The Alliance has many projects active at any given moment. If there isn’t one suited to your skills now, wait twenty-four hours and the landscape will change.”

Calline nodded curtly.

“Torian, perhaps you’d like to catch her up on what our Mandalorian allies have been doing at the edges of Wild Space?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Torian started an animated and remarkably efficient strategic and tactical description of the Mandalorian attacks on droid factories and supply centers.

When they reached ops, Ruth was already there, staring up at the big board. It was zoomed in on some corner of Imperial space. Lana didn’t need to guess who she was tracking.

She hurriedly set it to galactic center and turned. “Lana. Torian. Calline, it’s good to see you. How’s Wynston?”
“Okay,” Calline said stonily.

“We were just discussing assignments,” supplied Lana. “Our Mandalorian allies have been busy.”

“Killing,” said Calline. “Mostly.”

“Droids more than anything,” said Torian.

“Still destruction.”

“You would prefer a live catch?” said Ruth.

“Hm.” Calline nodded.

“I have one,” Lana said firmly. Ruth cast her a curious look. “There was a freighter captain…”

Ruth remembered the one, and scrambled to bring it up. He was all but irrelevant to the Alliance’s effort. But it meant that Calline would be reporting back…maybe after Wynston got here.

And yes, she would come up with any excuse to make sure that happened. Calline might be a mystery but Ruth was willing to bet she wasn’t a toxic one.

Maybe she could even convince her brother of that.

*

Wynston sat, fully dressed, on the edge of the bed. A moon was out halfheartedly tangling with a slow wrack of cloud. Without the rain, the night outdoors was quiet and garishly bright.

No one came to the window.

What had possessed him to tell Calline the truth? This vision from his past had been so direct, so disarming. And he had been close to her once. They had shared everything, once, back when they had nothing but each other. But in the end the rules of the world never changed. If you told the truth you got punished for it. Any secret that wasn’t your armor was someone else’s weapon.

As soon as he judged himself finished here Wynston would come home. And he would be witty, urbane, charming, all those things he had said. He had said his confessions. Let them be sealed.

After nearly a week of being worked over by experts whose entire job was to strip both pleasure and social lubrication from him, Wynston felt tired and desperately, desperately lonely. He had to hang on to something during this particular reset. And he knew exactly who he wanted to hang on to. But they were far away, and he wasn’t finished here.

He lay down, staying dressed, staying tensed, wondering. But all through the night, no one came.

*

“Pazaak?” said Theron. “I didn’t know you played pazaak.”

Ruth looked up from her cantina chair. “I don’t. Except with her.”

“I taught her,” said Vette. The smuggler hadn’t been around much, and most of her vibe with Ruth was fraught, but they seemed to be at peace. “Poor kid grew up all her life thinking there wasn’t such a quick way to part ways with your money.”
“Ninety per cent certain she made up some rule set that only she can win,” said Ruth. “This is how she gets back at the rich and powerful.”

“I get back at those by robbing them directly,” said Vette. “Saves me the awkward small talk that way. Aaand, three.”

“Ouch.”

“As long as you’re resetting, can I get you ladies anything from the bar?”

“A fighting chance?” said Ruth.

“Nice slice of humble pie?” said Vette.

“Drinks,” he said, chuckling. “I’ll be back.”

* 

Three days. Rylon’s second tour with his father under the protection of the ship’s commander, a man who well understood the relative ranks of Sith orders, was to be three days, a routine run within noncombatant space. So Quinn took on Rylon’s guardianship and went about his duties.

Lord Rhik came without fanfare, and docked his sleek transport to the Revocation’s airlock. The only warning from the bridge’s perspective was a series of security stations going silent.

Rylon was studying an educational program in the corner. His father was speaking with Captain Wolf and Commander Belledings on the main bridge platform. He felt it before they did: a crawling darkness, like Lord Lana but less contained, more red, more…questing in its creeping. He closed the program and watched while the door slid open and a tall red-skinned man with a lightsaber stalked through. This was the kind of apparition he had surreptitiously read about on Tython. This was a Pureblood Sith.

The Sith walked right up to Commander Belledings. “Who was in charge here?” he said in a loud, high voice.

“My lord.” Commander Belledings bowed deeply. Captain Wolf and Father bowed as well. Rylon realized that everyone around him had gone silent. One console screen was still showing a blinking moving light, and Rylon almost spoke up to tell it to stop. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“You will change course. You now answer exclusively to Lord Rhik. That would be me.”

There was a rapid string of words Rylon didn’t recognize, followed by Belledings saying “My lord, we sail under the auspices of Darth Ravage. All reassignments must-”

Rhik raised one hand. Belledings drew up on his toes and started scrabbling at his neck. The reason why was not immediately obvious. Darkly fascinated, Rylon watched while the man struggled for a breath that didn’t come. Rylon hoped, with every jerk, that it would. But it kept not, and not, and not, until Rhik finally let him fall.

Rhik didn’t even look at the man after that.

Captain Wolf was stepping up. “My lord. Give us the order.”

“Set course for the coordinates I have entered on your computers, Commander. And one more thing. There is a boy on this ship, ten years old, fair-skinned, dark-haired. You will surrender him
Father surged forward. “He’s not here anymore,” he said loudly. “We let him off at Duros, my lord.”

“Oh, happy father? Then who is the Force presence I see right over there?” Without turning, the Sith stabbed one finger directly at Rylon. “There are consequences for lying.”

The clawed hand swung back toward Father. Father’s chin came up sharply, but he drew his blaster and squeezed off three shots before Rylon could even sort out what was happening. The Sith dodged, gave a hoarse roar, and flourished his red twin-bladed lightsaber. Captain Wolf was drawing her blaster, too.

Rylon reached out, knowing, horribly, that nobody was looking at him. He thought about the clasp of the Sith’s cloak, just round his neck. He pulled down and back, hard. The Sith yelped and fell backwards. His unarmored head made a sick noise against the deck.

Father and Captain Wolf closed in, and Rylon settled back in his seat, feeling nauseous.

* 

Quinn holstered his blaster when he was sure the menace was dead. “Commander,” he said at once to Captain Wolf. “At your command.”

“Get him back to his ship,” Wolf said loudly. “Jettison it and destroy it. Not you.” She jerked her head around him. “You.” She straightened. There was fire in her eyes. “Look after Rylon,” she said quietly.

“Yes, Commander.” He had to be sure she knew that. He had been through changes of command like this before. And would again. Sleeping with the new one might or might not count for anything. Quick obedience in commands, that counted.

Though, frankly, it didn’t count for much. He spun on his heel and rushed to where Rylon was sitting in the corner, clutching his seat.

“Are you all right?” said Quinn. “He didn’t do anything, did he?”

Rylon shook his head, tight-lipped.

“Good.” But Rylon had done something. Lord Rhik would have killed Wolf, Quinn, or both if not grabbed by a Force Quinn couldn’t see. And this was the only person who could have done it. “Walk with me.”

He made it to their quarters. He spun. He hugged Rylon, hard. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

* 

Rylon peered up, Father’s uniform rough against his cheek and chin. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. The crew and I are safe.” Hurriedly Father knelt. “You did the right thing. I only wish you hadn’t had to.”

“Is he…dead?”
“Yes. Capt-Commander Wolf and I saw to that. That wasn’t for you to do.”

He thought of the sound of that head hitting the floor. “Oh.” This dread he felt in incoming waves, it wasn’t just leftover fear from the scene. It was something else. “What are we going to tell Mom?”

For a moment Father looked as lost as Rylon had ever seen him. “The truth,” he said thickly. “I will not make you party to that lie.”

There was a consequence there that pressed heavily on him. “Am I going to get to see you anymore if we tell her?”

Little lines were threading into his voice. “I don’t know.”

“So don’t tell her.” He hugged harder. His father wasn’t gone yet. If he hugged tight enough he could keep it that way. “Father, please. Don’t. I didn’t do anything.”

“I’ll think of what to say.” Father squeezed him and let him go, setting steadying hands on his arms. “Above all, you must not lie to your mother.”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Rylon.

Father swallowed and let out a ragged breath. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” he said, as if that was the same thing.

*

Quinn reminded himself, firmly, that all was well and he had an explanation for this. It didn’t feel as stable as it usually did. “You should go to bed,” he told Rylon.

Was the boy paler than usual? “I’m not tired.”

“Ah.” He was. “Go find something you like to read. Your studies will still be there in the morning.”

He retreated to his bedroom to holo Wolf. “Commander?”

“Everything under control here,” she said. She at least looked composed. “The Sith’s ship is destroyed. I’m sending to Lord Ravage for further orders.”

“As is proper.”

A little concern crept into her expression. “Is he okay?”

“I think so.”

“Does he know?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think he fully understands.”

“Thank the Emperor for small mercies. Listen, Captain…” she grinned. “I can’t believe how fast you got moving. We’re not half bad at this, huh?”

“Your first Sith, Commander?”

She glowed. “Absolutely. You?”
“No.” That seemed like a good time to drop the conversation, so he did.

*

“Rylon?” said Ruth. “What’s wrong?”

Quinn followed close on their son’s heels. “May we speak in private, my lord?”

The answer was obvious. “My quarters. Come along.” She set the pace from the landing pad, and it was fast, and Quinn and Rylon kept up without complaint. The boy’s eyes were wide as he took everything in. It was like he hadn’t expected to see it again.

“Rylon?” she said. “Are you all right?”

He started and looked up at her. “Yes,” he said solemnly.

When they reached Ruth’s living room Quinn was blunt and concise. A Sith had come looking for Rylon. Rylon had intervened in the attack. Quinn had killed the attacker.

“Mom,” said Rylon. “Breathe.”

She loosened her arms around him. Rylon coughed and sucked in a long breath. Ruth looked him in the eye. “You’re safe now. You understand that?”

“Yes, Mom.”

She looked up. Quinn was inclining his head meaningfully toward the bedroom. She nodded. “Do you want me to set you up with something to read? Your father and I just need to settle a few things.”

His forehead scrunched up. “Am I ever going back?”

“Of course you–” Quinn was making a decisive throat-cutting gesture. She caught his eye, then looked back down. “We’ll talk, Rylon. But you will see him again. Is that all right?”

“What about Captain Wolf?”

“If circumstances allow,” Quinn said crisply. “Go on. We’ll be out soon.”

And Ruth stood and followed him in, and closed the door after them.

Quinn didn’t look at the bed. Instead he stood to one side of the door and folded his hands behind his back, as he so often did when he was nervous. “My lord. You should know.” His throat bobbed for a second. “When Rylon knocked that Sith down. He died the moment he hit the floor.”

Ruth’s mouth fell open. “Ten,” she said hollowly. “He’s ten years old and you tell me he killed someone? You tell me he had to kill someone?”

He bowed his head. “My lord, I take full responsibility. It won’t happen again.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

A tight pause. “I know,” he whispered.

“The only way we can keep this from happening again is if we don’t let him back out with you.”
“I know.”

Ruth wasn’t sure what she was screaming at inside. The confrontation? Or the inevitability of it? “I don’t accept that. He loves you. He needs you.”

He looked up, cautious but with something else dawning. “My lord?”

“I don’t know how this works. This? Odessen? It’s my fantasy of how the world should be. It’s safe. Forgiving. Out there is the world you and I come from. And it’s cruel and dangerous and someday he will need to know how to live in it. But not now. Not when he’s ten.”

“Do we wait some years, my lord?”

“Haven’t you already lost enough of those?” She took a deep breath. “You are so strong. I forget sometimes that you have limits. That one monster like me…”

“You are not, and never were, a monster.”

“But people with my kind of power can be. And people like you can’t always stop them. Look at me. Please.” He did. “This is just…I was eighteen when I first killed someone in self-defense.”

He nodded. “I was a little younger.”

She had never known that. Somehow it wasn’t a surprise. “So sooner or later we will teach him what we know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Quinn, you know that if I were there I would have done the exact same thing.”

“But you’re not a child.”

“No. I’m not.”

He stepped forward. “Come with me. If you don’t want us separated then don’t separate us. I see no other conclusion. Your allies can fend for themselves. They have Darth Scythia. They can spare one warrior to take up the fight elsewhere. You and I, with Rylon safe, there’ll be no one to stop us.”

She always needed arguments once he had a plan in mind. She needed rock solid arguments, or he would sweep her away. “My life is here. My home. I have a safe refuge for my child. I have the love of a good man.” Her tongue was suddenly very dry. “It’s not his fault he isn’t you.”

He stepped closer still, eyes intent. “Is that the deciding factor?”

No, she thought. No, his failure to be Quinn wasn’t it, not even slightly, not in a million years. No. She opened her mouth and croaked. And just then the door banged open.

She jerked away from Quinn as Theron stuck his head in. He frowned, stepped the rest of the way in, closed the door, and pointed. “Rylon said you’d be in here. I was, uh, after my jacket.” Looking at no one, he headed for the dresser.

“Theron, we need to talk,” said Ruth. “Quinn, we’ll sort this out. You can go.”

“No,” Theron said, too loudly. “Why doesn’t he stay. Why don’t we all talk this through like adults.” Theron shrugged into his jacket and gave a sickly grin. “What is ‘this’?”
“Theron, a Sith came looking for Rylon on Quinn’s ship. He attacked Quinn and the other officers. Rylon used the Force to help Quinn stop him.”

“Where by stop, this being an Imperial warship, you mean kill,” said Theron.


Theron transferred his searing attention to Quinn. “You got your kid to help you murder a man.”

“It isn’t like that,” said Ruth.

Theron started pacing in Quinn’s general direction. “Oh, it’s not like that? Good. Because if it was like that I might have to get up-set.” Close enough now, he threw Quinn a left hook that landed like a shattering slap. Quinn reeled and dragged himself upright. His face remained set.

“Theron!” said Ruth. “Rylon was defending him. As he would you or me.”

“Yeah, only ‘you or me’ never put him in that position,” said Theron, lowering his hand. “He shouldn’t be out there, Ruth. Not without you.”

“I know,” said Ruth. “We won’t let it happen again.”

“We?” Something broke in Theron’s eyes. “Are you going out there?”

“No.”

“Oh.” He shook himself. “Well, good.”

“Quinn, we’ll need to arrange around your duties. It’s only until he’s a little older. And you’ll be able to communicate whenever you want.”

He straightened, his eye staring red. “I understand, my lord.”

“Dismissed.” The hurt in Quinn’s eyes was the necessary tradeoff for the vindication in Theron’s. Always a tradeoff. She wasn’t sure how much she had left in the middle by now.

Quinn left. Theron stayed. “Ruth…” Theron ran his hands through his hair and tried unsuccessfully to arrange it again. “I didn’t look for your son all those years. Okay? I didn’t know your son. I only knew you. And for five years I thought about you. I would see you in crowds and wait for you to turn around and see me…five years. Only, I knew you never gave me a second thought. I was just a guy, and we had bigger problems. But then you came back. And I got a second chance. I know how lucky I am. You don’t give those out to just anyone.” He looked away. “But you do give them out. I was not expecting to find you two consulting over our bed.”

“Only because we needed privacy one room away from a safe spot for Rylon. Theron, he will never be out of my life entirely. But you’re the one who’s still here. Loving you is simple. It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t ask questions I can’t answer.”

He twitched something that wasn’t really a smile. “But is it what you want?”

Didn’t ask questions she couldn’t answer. She was sure whether she was feeling her own frustration, or his. “I don’t think saying ‘yes’ is really what’s going to resolve this.”

“No?” He said it like he agreed. “What will?”

“One day. Maybe another. Maybe another one after that, all with you. But right now, Theron, I
have to go out there. Rylon needs me.”

He sighed. He nodded. “Can I help?”

“You have nothing to do with what happened to him. I think he could use that, if you have the time.”

“Yeah?”

She eased into his space and made a meaningless adjustment to his collar, and his smile warmed her through. “Yeah.”
His Head Games

Chapter Summary

Theron, Rylon, and Ruth walk together. Wynston talks about returning to Odessen. Ruth calls Quinn to coordinate remote visitation. Ruth, Theron, and Rylon see a play. Ruth leaves to deal with the one who sent Lord Rhik to threaten her son. (Theron, Rylon, Ruth, Wynston, Lana, Quinn, Vartha Wolf)

“Theron!” said Rylon. “Fear is a disease; hope is its only cure.”

“Rylon!” said Theron. “Believe in yourself or no one else will.”

“What?” said Ruth. Though the two of them smiling at one another was a salve to concerns she didn’t want to talk about.

“We’re just sharing favorite Jedi one-liners,” Theron said cheerfully. The three of them formed up to stroll down the hallway in the general direction of the common classroom. “Though I think this guy makes some of them up.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Rylon. “Master Moic said that one all the time.”

“Yeah, but ‘Fear is a great motivator’?”

Rylon laughed. Ruth worked on continuing to walk in a straight line. He laughed just like she did. When had he even heard that? There had been so much tension in Odessen since his arrival…how had he picked that up? And yet, there it was.

She had no intelligent followup. “Theron will pick you up this afternoon,” she said.

“Where will you be?” said Rylon.

“I need to coordinate some things with Lana.” Namely, returning to her duties. She consented to these requirements only under duress. But somewhere along the line they had become, not only her responsibilities, but her life. So she was going back.

“Will you be leaving Odessen?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Lord Lana wants you to.”

“Ah,” Ruth muttered. “I’ll check in with her. You don’t need to worry.”

“Oh.”

They talked about nothing important until they reached the educational complex. Ruth let Rylon go and, the second he was out of sight, rounded on her companion. “You have my boy laughing.”

Theron grinned. “I knew he had it in him. Trust me, I remember what it was like to feel like I needed permission.”
“I love you. You have no idea how much I love you. I could exhaust my entire vocabulary and only get started telling you how much I love you.”

He grinned wider and set one hand on her waist. “Careful, there. You’ll make people jealous.”

She hugged him, hard, and leaned slightly away to face him. “I’ll admit I was afraid that you wouldn’t get along.”

“He’s a great kid. I mean it. He’s got a lot of you in him.”

“Of me? I screw up. I let people get hurt.”

His arms were sliding steadily around her waist. “If I loved you any less for being human, we wouldn’t have made it this far.”

It welled up in her eyes and she couldn’t describe it right. “Theron, come with me.”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. I have one specific stop in mind before we go to HQ.”

He dipped to touch his forehead to hers, and laughed softly, eyes wide open. “Lead the way.”

*

The mission was loud, and thankless, and involved more brushes with death than Theron liked to allow in his weekly schedule. Ruth was with him the whole time. Ruth was a wonder. Like always.

They talked idly about the Alliance on the way home. It was still growing every day. They didn’t have time to get to know all the new recruits as they had when it was starting. Theron was used to an organization too large to personally police. Ruth, it seemed, had more trouble trusting.

Well, could he blame her?

They were nearing the end of their journey back to Odessen when Ruth fell into a thoughtful silence. She got up and started pacing across the bridge. Theron watched. “Ruth? Babe?”

She started and smiled at him. “I’ve been thinking,” she said.

“You’ve done that a lot since Rylon came back.” It was starting to make conversation awkward.

A direct hit. “I know. There’s a lot to sort out.”

“Are you going to let me in on any of it?”

She looked wounded. “Oh, Theron. Yes.”

He waited. It seemed he had been doing that a lot since Rylon came back, and he hated it. The last thing he wanted was for that sweet kid to become a point of contention. “Like when?” he said. Ruth’s face fell. He’d gone too far. “Listen. If this is about Rylon? I know, I’m not his father.”

“I wish you were,” she said. She stopped by his chair, and he stood to face her. “And not just because it would make things simpler,” she said. “If I could have that with you…” she seemed to realize she was talking… “this is not how I thought this conversation was going to start.” She took an interest in the floor.
“Hey. Look at me.” She did. “That might be a good conversation to have.” He realized he was smiling. Kids were way in the future…if she even wanted to go through that again. But she wasn’t getting upset with the idea. “In a little while.”

She pushed up and kissed him. The worry cleared from her eyes for a few dazzling seconds. “You were saying?”

“Right. Yes. I’m not Rylon’s father. But I think there’s something I can help you with.”

“What?”

“Dealing with his actual father. Let me be there, Ruth.”

Ruth frowned, clearly thinking fast. “So you can hit him again?”

“If he endangers Rylon again, sure. But I was thinking more for moral support for you.”

“He’s my responsibility, Theron. You shouldn’t have to…”

“Every time he touches you you come away bloody. Do you not see that?”

Something cold came over her face, and stayed. “He doesn’t touch me.”

“Sorry. You know what I meant.”

“I’m not sure I do,” she said stiffly. “Theron, this isn’t your fight.”

“If it’s a fight, you don’t have to keep it for yourself. Just let me be there. You need to discuss Rylon? Fine, do it with me in the room. I’ll back you up. No matter what.” He sighed. “But I think you already knew that. Whatever he does, whatever he says to get in your head, whatever arguments, whatever persuasions…see if they sound different when you’ve got a pocket sanity check.”

She pressed her lips together. She addressed his collar. “I think that would help.”

“Call on me.” He hugged her closer. “I’m right here.”

She nuzzled at his ear and it was just right. “Why did you have to be so perfect?” she whispered.

He laughed uneasily. “Uh, what’s the past tense for?”

“Hm. Nothing.” She threw her arms around him and squeezed. “Nothing, my dearest.”

* 

Lana got the text-only message at six in the morning, just as she was about to come off her second shift. She was tired right up until she read her holo’s display.

*At your earliest convenience, find some privacy and call me. W.*

Heart pounding, she rushed to her quarters and fumbled her holo upright. She called at once and got a response nearly as quickly.

“Wynston,” she said.

Her familiar Chiss stood straight and slim, his jacket sweeping to his knees. There were dark
hollows under his eyes, but his expression was his usual cordial near-smile. “Lord Lana,” he said. “How are you?”

“The Alliance is still here.” He continued to wait. “I’m fine. Wynston, how are you?”

“Is Calline with you?”

“She’s traveling. She hasn’t said much but she’s staying involved.”

“Good, good. I apologize for making myself unavailable for so long. I regret that it was necessary. It is, if you’ll let it be, your last problem at my hands.”

“When are you coming back?”

He started looking near her left ear. “I had a great deal of time to think. More than I’ve ever had in my life. It was educational, but I can’t recommend it as a pastime. Regardless. I’ve divested myself of quite a lot here. And that was necessary, and it was right. And will continue to be necessary.”

None of which answered her question. “Wynston, are you breaking up with me?”

“Lana…” He looked away. “That’s all part of this, isn’t it? I’ve become a liability. I demonstrated that with ample flair. I can take on analysis jobs if you want, my brain’s not completely gone soft, but I’ll understand if-”

“Come home.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“Come home.”

He smiled weakly. “You don’t even know if you’d like me sober.”

“Come. Home.”

He had a way of looking into her that she had always thought was just part of his persona. Well… maybe it wasn’t just that. “As you wish.” He bowed. When he came back up he looked her in the eye. “I’ll see you soon, Lana.”

She stood for a few long moments, staring at her holo. Then she gripped it and laughed. His disappearance wasn’t forever after all. She hadn’t really believed it until she heard his voice. Wynston’s spoken report was his bond. Now and, she dearly hoped, always.

* 

This was more or less what Wynston was hoping for:

“I’m home,” he said.

Lana swept him to her quarters, their quarters, without a word. When the door was closed she pushed him against it. “I love you,” she said fiercely, and kissed him, touching him in every way she knew, and she knew a lot about him by now. Her body demanded a response, hands and other things, seeking the hitch in her breath and not giving up until he got it.

“I love you,” he whispered into her mouth, and she squeezed him harder. There were weeks to make up for.
“Are you all right?” she asked the skin of his shoulder as she tugged his shirt out of place.

She was everywhere, her scent, her hands, the taste of her sweet on his tongue. “Lana, everything I’ve ever done was meant to get me to you.”

“And we’re here. Welcome home.”

This is how it actually went:

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“And we’re here. Welcome home.”

*  

“Theron, do you have a few minutes?”

“Argue that one with Lana,” said Theron. “Though, given that she doesn’t know we’re up yet, she might not have anything for me yet.”

Ruth smiled and leaned into him. “I was going to schedule something with Quinn. A holocall with Rylon. Something to tide him over until the next time he has a few days off.”

“Okay. When’s the call?”

“Well, I’m about to call to decide that.”

“You need to make a call to schedule a call?”

Ruth rubbed her temples, not least to cover her falling expression. “It sounded reasonable at the time.”

“All right. I’ll be there. It should be less stressful for you than dealing with his head games by yourself.”

“Great. Let me just get dressed.” She hopped out of bed. “You…technically have to, too, sadly.”

“We can undo it when we’re done,” said Theron. “Barring additional Lana assignments.”

“But she doesn’t know we’re up yet.” She smiled.

Once she made the call Quinn showed up immediately, immaculate in uniform. “My lord,” he said, bowing. His eyes darted toward Theron and back. He made no further acknowledgment. “Is there a
“Not just yet. I haven’t woken him up yet. He’s been looking forward to class. He’s been studying like mad ever since he got back here.” She allowed a smile. “He’s started lecturing me on holocrons.”

“Does he have tutoring with an appropriate Sith master as we discussed?”

Theron shifted restlessly. Ruth had to cast back to what the hell Quinn was talking about. They might have mentioned it while daydreaming about possible future children ten years ago. That hardly counted. “I’m in the process of finding the right teacher for the scholarly side of things.”

“Whatever resources our son requires. Keep me informed.”

The emphasis was killing her. “You can stop that, Quinn. Everyone understands. You and I are his parents. He is jointly ours. No one here is disputing that fact.”

“As you say, my lord. And his training?”

“It’s in order. I wanted to ask about your schedule.”

“I can arrange some time between oh three hundred and oh four hundred hours Kaas standard any day of the week. Inconvenient, I’ll grant, my lord, if you’re…still on that schedule?”

“Not for a long time,” she said dryly. “This time of year, that should be early afternoon on Odessen. I can make it work. His training will work around it.”

“Naturally, my lord. Your supervision is the operative factor. Your powers have only increased over time. I have no doubt your capabilities exceed even Quesh.”

The memory lanced. And she fought it. “They do. Every day with him.”

Quinn raised his eyebrows, a barely admitted challenge.

Theron looked between the two of them. “What?”

Quinn’s gaze finally landed full on. “I guess you had to be there,” he drawled.

“Malavai, control yourself!” The memory vanished. The words came out in the old tone of command, the one for giving orders, the one for the Wrath. She couldn’t find it in herself to regret it. “Theron’s involved. I trust him to do what’s right for Rylon. I expect you to do the same.”

He withdrew into himself, leaving only downcast eyes and blandness. “Of course, my lord.”

“Tomorrow. Oh three twenty. Just so you don’t waste time wondering, Theron’s going to be there. Understood?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Dismissed.”

He bowed and cut out.

Ruth squeezed her eyes shut and fell back a step. She was waiting for Quinn’s will to stop feeling like a physical object in her way. “That wasn’t less stressful,” she groaned.
Theron’s tawny eyes were concerned. “You sounded like a Sith Lord,” he said.

“I’ll never be anything else to him. One of many reasons why he’s not here. If he didn’t love my son you know I wouldn’t even let him talk…but he does. Please be with me next time. He needs to understand that you are not going away.”

“You got it.”

“You being here was important. He wanted to know whether I would defend you at the cost of our truce. Now he knows. He found my limit and he won’t go near it again.” That was where the good news ended. “He’ll take the long way around. He’ll make compelling excuses to contact me without you. Compliance, deference, keeping his head down but his help always fortuitously ready. Building my reliance on him. For future use.”

Theron stared. “You know his whole playbook, don’t you.”

“I was married to him once. Can we please, please please, change the subject?”

“Gladly. What’re you doing after dinner? Vette talked this theater troupe into stopping by, and they’ve got…oh. Oh, you’re Imperial. You’ve never seen an Ibbis play, have you?”

“A what?”

Theron laughed. “Only the best comic playwright in the history of the Core. You are in for a treat.”

---

“I thought he was taller,” muttered Ruth, and snickered.

Rylon helpfully stood up on his toes. “Mmmeeeeerrrrgh,” he said.

Ruth tapped his head and giggled. “You got it exactly.”

“Told you you’d like it,” said Theron. “Get into bed, chief. Your mother’ll still be there for the funny parts in the morning.”

Ruth tucked Rylon in and kissed his forehead. “Good night.”

“Night, Mom. Night, Theron.”

Theron put his arm around Ruth as they walked out, and she leaned comfortably into him. “That was ridiculously fun,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You know I think Rylon successfully recited the entirety of act two on the way back? Kid’s got a promising career if he can remember his lines like that.”

“Kid’s going to realize that all of Ibbis’s plays are available on the Holonet and he’ll do nothing else with his time for the next six weeks. I should make my apologies to his teacher before she thinks he’s gone completely batty.”

“Just say he takes after you. Battiness explained.”

She shut him up with a kiss.
The holocall was rated high priority. Ruth pushed away from the navigator’s station. “I need to take this,” she said to Theron, and headed around the corner to the holo room.

Quinn showed up, his first unscheduled contact with her since Rylon had come home. She folded her arms over her chest. “Problem, Captain?”

“Virinos Geth, my lord.”

Darth Scythia’s right-hand man. He had taken a small fleet and vanished from the midst of the Zakuul invasion six years ago. “What about him?”

“The man who sent Lord Rhik to kidnap Rylon. It was Virinos Geth.”

“That means he’s come out of hiding, at long last?”

“Not exactly, my lord. But he has been sending feelers out, attempting to accumulate influence before showing himself. I believe I have the next location of his command ship.” He leaned forward. “I ask you to consider instilling some discipline into him. He cannot be allowed to continue probing for your weaknesses.”

She wondered whether he remembered that killing on command wasn’t her day job anymore. “You want me to kill him, I suppose?”

“He may yet be useful. I only ask that you discourage him from harming you and yours. Though… if he were to come to an untimely end, I would not mourn.”

She transferred the call to her hand holo and headed to the bridge. “Theron, Quinn has news of the person who threatened Rylon. I’m going to make sure he understands what a bad idea that was. I want a small boarding party and I want it now. You, me, Quinn.”

“Commander Wolf is at your disposal,” said Quinn. “She seems to carry a grudge regarding the incursion on her ship and execution of her former commanding officer.”

Ruth hesitated. “Is she reliable?”

“Yes,” he said blankly.

"I'm having my own people check your data. I'm not walking into your trap twice."

"I'll send everything we've gathered. Run it by your spies. You'll see I'm good for my word. This is about our son."

“We’ll need people at a security post monitoring. Maybe your Wolf will do. You three can manage security. I’ll go to the bridge alone.”

“My lord,” said Quinn, making a face. “He threatened Rylon.”

“Fine. You and me.” She raised a hand against the objection Theron was about to make. “I need this to be small scale.”

Less than two days later they reached the rendezvous. The ship was a frigate, painted with flames streaming from every viewport. Theron rolled his eyes powerfully. Quinn and Commander Wolf
just watched him and Ruth.

“There is a security post near the main airlocks,” said Wolf. "I believe Lord Geth uses mostly droids, so keep your ion weapons handy. Mr. Shan and I will watch at the security post. Can you slice the cameras, Mr. Shan?”

“Just point me,” he said, frowning at Ruth and her insistence he stay behind.

Wolf nodded fractionally. “My lord. After you.”

Ruth took her lightsabers out and stalked through the airlock ready to fight. The first trio of droids standing guard were taken to pieces before her companions could place a shot.

The security station was taken easily. Commander Wolf started quashing the alarms. “My lord,” she said crisply. “I’ll keep security in circles.”

“Thank you.” She nodded to Wolf. She nodded to Theron, and he stared back at her with a mute plea. “Keep her safe,” said Ruth. “This is between Geth and me.”

And Quinn, but who was counting?

Wolf had been right; Geth favored droids. Ruth felt no compunction whatsoever about staying at the top of her combat game, seizing, deflecting, chopping, pushing on. She reached a wide hallway and took down two armored rollers. There was another droid. It threw something just as Ruth was flinging her lightsaber to arc through its neck and back to her.

Just at that moment Quinn rushed her, gripping her arms to bear her against the wall in an impact that fused them both from knee to shoulder. He gripped the sides of her head and turned her face up.

“Mm,” she moaned instinctively. Then, “What are you-”

The sonic grenade was muffled under his hands. He pressed into her and grunted with the impact, then sagged. Ruth took his arm over her shoulder and waited for the stun to pass. Seconds later he swayed onto his own power. His body rocked away from hers.

[Vartha]

“What is he doing?” growled Theron. Their microphones were inactive, but Lord Niral’s and Quinn’s weren’t.

“Stopping a sonic bomb,” grumbled Vartha. “I had no idea he was so…self-sacrificing.”

“Only when he wants to be.” That moan sounded over again in Vartha’s head, and she had no doubt the agent was hearing it too. “That’s it,” he said. “I’m out.”

“Mr. Shan?”

He was staring at a blueprint of the ship. “You can hold the fort.” He looked up at a grate in the ceiling. “Give me a hand up?”

“What?”

“Do I need to say please?”

She moved to join him, and knelt, and peered up at the ceiling. “You can make that?”
He shot out a latch and caught the grating on the way down. “I know how to jump.” He stepped up on her knee and, before she could register the discomfort, leaped up grasp the edge of the duct. “Stay safe,” he grunted, and swung up.

Vartha heard the mics continuing. “You okay?” came Ruth’s voice. Above Vartha Theron slid and rapid-crawled away.

Quinn tapped his ear. On the nearest camera it was plain to see something dark trickling out. “I’ll recover,” he said, his voice too quiet, as though he didn’t know how to modulate it. “Shall we continue?”

Vartha had gotten in on this job because she relished the prospect of taking down another Sith. She hadn’t counted on the one who would be on her side.

From there Lord Niral seemed to try more stealth, leading the way around every corner, leaping to silence droids in moments of surprise. Alarms were spreading from sector to sector. Quinn still played rear guard and support fire both. She pointed at times, and at times he acted on some command Vartha couldn’t even see, little instructions. She understood now why he had spent years outside the formal command structure, and why after coming back he hadn’t pursued the promotions he could have seized. He was made for the field, without the complications of command. The two of them together made it to a sealed bulkhead halfway up the ship’s length and stopped.

[Quinn]

Quinn proceeded to the console and passed his hand over the controls. Before he could settle the door opened. They found Theron on the other side, two bare wires in his hands at the console on his side.

“Theron,” sputtered Ruth, “how did you get there?”

“HVAC systems. Gotta love ’em.” Theron smiled, not pleasantly. “Thought you guys could use a hand.”

“I could use a small boarding party,” growled Ruth. “As I said. Get in line.”
Ruth faces Virinos Geth. Theron welcomes her home. Wynston sits Ruth down for a conversation. (Quinn, Ruth, Theron, Vartha Wolf, Virinos Geth, Ashara Zavros, Vette, Wynston)

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Quinn followed close on Ruth’s heels, leaving Theron to trail. What had possessed him to violate her orders he didn’t know, but he was here now…and best cut out of the action. He placed shots around Quinn when droids came up. It would have to do.

Theron reached the controls for the next bulkhead before Quinn could reach it. The cyborg was efficient, Quinn could grant him that. Probably desperate to regain some credibility. He was Republic, of course he tried to substitute flair for discipline. What was it in Ruth’s head or heart that preferred that? That didn’t matter for the moment. Killing guards mattered, and Quinn did so efficiently.

Theron darted forward again at the doors to the bridge. “Ready?” he said.

Ruth brandished her two red lightsabers. “Yes.”

The door opened. A tall, robed Sith Pureblood turned from the viewport. “Well, well,” he said. “I was wondering who was so busily cutting my defenses to pieces. I don’t see your mask, Wrath.”

“You see my face, Lord Geth. As you must have expected when you sent your minion for my son.”

“Oh, that. I was just curious. I know you would never have left him undefended by at least one competent Sith.” Quinn stiffened. He had been all the defense Rylon had. It was because of that that Rylon had had to intercede in the battle – to kill this man’s minion. “So tell me, are you here to slay me for my impudence?”

“That’s certainly an option.” She pointed to one side. Quinn walked up beside her and trained his blaster on the staff seated on that side of the bridge. Theron, watching, pointed his toward the other side. Quinn’s hearing was coming back, slowly, though everything seemed to come at a distance; torn between watching his master and his charges, he settled on his charges. If she needed him she could Force tap him.
Something had come over Ruth. She was standing taller, her gait smoother, her chin up. She was walking like a woman in charge. “Virinos Geth, you attacked my son. If you thought you could hide from that anywhere in this galaxy, you were wrong.”

“Will you accept an apology, O merciful Outlander?”

“Depends. How fast can you talk?” She leaped.

In a heartbeat Virinos Geth had a purple double-bladed lightsaber in hand. He Force pushed with his off hand, slowing Ruth’s landing. She whirled, off balance for a moment, and spun back with a hard thrust. Geth parried.

One of the people on the floor was edging one hand toward a console. Quinn shot and hit her upper arm. “Anyone else?” he said flatly.

The battle raged just at the edge of sight. He felt every move. Force Lightning spat, sabers clashed, robes swirled: Ruth Niral was in her element. His arousal was a distant sensation behind the sharpness of the moment.

[Ruth]

A door opened behind Ruth. Her senses were screaming: the effort of tracking every Force signature in the room was straining her external Force abilities to the limit. She felt a stranger racing in, lightsaber at the ready. “My lord,” shouted Quinn, loudly.

“Ha, how do you like your chances now?” bellowed Virinos Geth. His sleeve was fluttering, cut, but he was in high spirits as he pressed the attack.

Ruth blocked. She reached out with one hand, back in the apprentice’s general direction. The Force bloomed around her and it was all she could do to ride its crest. The apprentice jerked up off the floor. There was a crack. He fell again in time for Ruth to block Geth’s next swing.

But someone else was moving. She let her efforts creep into the red. It spread warm throughout her. These idiots disgusted her. But they would die. Theron shouted something. A blaster reported, and again, and Theron cried out. “Theron!” she shouted, whirling and ready to kill whatever had threatened him.

Virinos Geth seized the back of her neck. Then there was pain.

She was dimly aware of Quinn and Theron both shooting something. Force lightning was coursing into the back of her neck, up her scalp, down her back, the pain blinding even while tendrils lashed at her face. Ruth stabbed behind herself and missed. The Sith was laughing, a shrill patter on her aching ears. She fell to her knees, trying desperately to command her screaming muscles to do anything other than pulse.

The scene slowed but the pain didn’t lessen. “Are you so shaken?” Valkorion said. “I can stop the pain.”

“Go to hell.”

“I believe you’ll get there first if you do not find your discipline.”

“Let me go.”

“Let’s see how much of you is left. Distractions, Outlander. Worthless distractions.”
“Stop talking about yourself.” She would not take that route out. Not even to stop – this.

Quinn was suddenly close. Ruth felt the gesture behind Virinos Geth’s head. The Sith barked, whirled, unleashed a stream of Force lightning into Quinn. Ruth forced herself around and swung her saber through the hideous pain of movement. It bit his side, deep, before he could turn. She kicked him, hard. And when he hit the deck she circled, stabbed his shoulder, withdrew. And stabbed again for good measure. Every arm movement was a wave of pain. Every strike was a moment’s relief.

“I subjugated the Emperor,” she yelled. “What makes you think I would be afraid of you?”

Distances sharpened around her and the world greyed. “Point of fact,” Valkorion said, a little snappishly.

“Shut up,” she said.

When Virinos Geth stirred she kicked his neck, then his head, hard.

“I can teach you pain,” she snarled through her own. “But you can never give it me in return. And you never will. I will spare your life, Virinos Geth. And when the day comes, you will serve my will.”

He stirred. She kicked him again. “You sound like our colleague Scythia,” he said, over a bloodied lip.

“Sometimes Scythia has a point.” She raised a hand and ripped a length of metal bar free from the wall. She grabbed his hand and held it up, then tied the metal bar around both wrist and railing. “When you’re feeling better you can get out of this.”

She instant she turned her back on him, he shot Force Lightning once more.

She didn’t move. The agony did. Her shape written in white-hot pain spun and sent one lightsaber spinning in a wide arc. Most of Virinos Geth’s head snapped back against the wall. The rest of it didn’t.

“We’re leaving,” she yelled, and went.

[Theron]

“My lord,” came Commander Wolf’s voice. “Other ships are coming. Time to leave. I believe I can restrain the droids while you move.”

“We need to get to medbay first,” Theron whispered for the benefit of the comms, not their enemies.

Ruth started walking. Quinn fell in behind her right shoulder. Theron, inwardly cursing, trailed at her left. She seemed to know the way.

“Out,” she said when she reached the cavernous medbay. “Now.” The staff complied with the speed and willful blindness of people used to dealing with Sith. Ruth grunted and headed to an exam table.

Theron gently nudged her hip. “You’re okay,” he said. She looked up at him with clouded blue eyes, but said nothing.
Quinn was carrying a roll of bandages. “Have you experience treating Force lightning burns in an Imperial lab?” he said coldly. “No? Out of my way.”

Ruth’s face looked bruised around the edges. “It’s really just my shoulders,” she said. “And neck, but don’t bandage, only do the parts my shirt will cover. And the top of my back. And the top of my chest.” Her voice cracked. “And my arms.”

“One at a time,” Quinn said softly. “Your shirt?”

She raised her arms slightly and stopped, looking ill. “I can’t,” she said hoarsely. “Cut down the back.”

“What?” said Theron.

Quinn was already brandishing scissors. He pulled her collar away from the back of her neck and sliced the shirt down nearly to the small of her back. With quick precise movements he folded the front and sleeves of her shirt down, revealing a crazed net of purple marks all over her fair skin.

Theron did his best not to recoil. “She needs to go in kolto!”

“I need to be seen walking out of here on my own power,” Ruth said tiredly. “Captain, continue.”

Quinn brushed her bra strap with his fingertips. “It stays on,” she whispered. He nodded and, without turning away from her, grabbed a bandage pad and started shredding it. He soaked a strip in kolto and smoothed it over her shoulder from bra line in front to shoulder blade in back, angled so none of it would show over her round neckline when she got her shirt back into place. More strips rapidly followed, covering the livid marks. Ruth was breathing through her teeth, harshly, a jagged inhalation and exhalation between periods of rigid stillness.

“You hands,” he said, gentle but wasting no time. He slid her long sleeve up her ruined flesh until she whimpered, then started winding more kolto bandages around. “We’ll be out soon.”

“I screwed that one up,” said Ruth, looking directly at Theron. He wondered whether that was supposed to be an apology.

“You carried the day,” said Quinn. “Here.” He eased her sleeves down, her neck up, and pinned the back of her shirt together. “That should suffice until we reach a kolto tank.”

“Thank you.” She eased off the exam table, straightened her back, and marched out again, Quinn – and Theron – in her wake.

Commander Wolf met them at the airlock. “Everything settled?” she said tightly.

“He won’t threaten me again,” said Ruth.

“He’s alive?”

“No,” said Quinn, with satisfaction.

“Very good.” She fell in beside Quinn as though following Sith around was a natural Imperial habit. Theron brought up the rear as they headed through the airlock into Ruth’s ship.

They almost made it out clean. The woman who stalked into the airlock hallway behind them was Togrutan, short, in dark robes.

Quinn, Theron, and Wolf raised their blasters. The woman swept her hand and all three clattered
away.

“Oh no,” she said loudly. “I came too late to save him. Whatever will our master Scythia do.”

Ruth couldn’t think through the pain of moving, but having set an intention she could carry it through. “Who are you?”

“An apprentice, for now. Maybe more now that Scythia’s second is gone. I’m going to Korriban. Scythia hasn’t gone there in person in months. It’s time they met someone who will.” Her lip quivered and stilled. “Until then? Call me Ashara.”

She let them go.

Ruth boarded the ship and headed for the medbay. Quinn followed. Theron stopped by the door. “Pilot,” he ordered.

Quinn sneered. “My lord-”


“Commander?” said Quinn.

She didn’t look thrilled to be second ranked. “Let’s go,” she said.

He headed into the medbay. Ruth was struggling with her mangled shirt.

“Let me,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m stiff from the waist up. There are scissors.”

“I’ve got you.” He alternately snipped and eased her close-fitting shirt off.

“Get me one of those bands,” she said. “Let’s be modest while we’re floating in kolto.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

“That cost me too much.” Theron started wrapping her in the gauzy bandeau. He didn’t have anything to say. “It cost me too much and now you’re angry at me.”

“I’m not angry, Ruth.”

“Angry at me and lying to me.”

Where did he start? The join at the hip with Quinn? The snapping strangers’ necks without even looking at them? The savage beating of a man who was already down? The way she wanted to walk out per Quinn’s advice instead of taking care of herself? This was the Sith Quinn slobbered over. This was the woman Ruth kept denying, denying, denying, without actually taking out of commission. This was the Emperor’s Wrath.

“Theron, please.”

“Just one question,” he said. “Did you enjoy it?”

She frowned. “What, being held in place and shocked with Force lightning for half a minute? No, I can’t say I did.”
“The rest of it. Being that Sith.”

“Enjoyment doesn’t enter into it. I am what I have to be.”

“I can’t talk about this right now. Let me help you up.”

“Theron…”

“Go on,” he said. “We can talk about it later.” When she wasn’t bleeding. He could give her that much. He picked up the breathing mask she would need. “Let’s do this.”

---

Rylon was reading in the living room when Theron reached his quarters. Their quarters.

“Theron! You’re back!”

“Hey, chief.” And, of course, a Jedi proverb: “The best first strike is a last one.”

“It is a rough road that leads to the heights of greatness.” returned Rylon. ”Where’s Mom?”

“She’s…in medbay. She’s going to be okay.”

Vette looked up from the console. “Problem?”

“Nothing she can’t handle. Thanks for looking after him.”

“My pleasure. I’ll go make sure the droids didn’t put her in upside down.” She hopped out of her seat and hurried out.

Leaving Rylon, wide-eyed. “Can we go visit?”

“I think she’s busy…strategizing. We’ll check in first thing tomorrow.” Theron brushed Rylon’s hair back from his forehead. “She went after the guy who tried to kidnap you. I don’t think he’ll be trying again any time soon.”

“Oh.” A shadow passed over his face and vanished. “She’s okay?”

“Nothing keeps her down for long. Let her rest. We’ll see her tomorrow.”

“Okay.” He brightened. “Want to see what I found out about acklays? They’re terrifying.”

Theron laughed. It eased the tension in his chest. “All right. Lay it on me.”

And the consultation going on behind his back…it couldn’t last forever. He clung to that. Even when he went to bed by himself. It couldn’t last forever.

*

Quinn made it three steps into Commander Wolf’s quarters before she tackled him from behind, swung around, and started kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

It was strange, kissing her back. Her mouth wasn’t the right shape. No, he reminded himself firmly, it was. “Commander?” he mumbled.

She backed him up to the wall and worried his lip between her teeth. “Possession is nine-tenths of the karking law,” she growled, and continued.
Rylon peered up at the kolto tank. “She never got this before,” he said in a small voice.

“She’s spent some time there.” Not since Theron had known her, but at some point in the past, he was sure. He’d seen enough of her to know that, much though it hurt to admit, she wasn’t untouchable. “What matters is, she’s safe. Your mother has recovered from a lot worse than one lousy Sith trying to shock her into line.”

“Will I learn how to shock people?”

“Stars, I hope not.” Theron clapped his shoulder. “You’ve got better things than that coming.”

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Ruth had to fight back to consciousness. She didn’t know how long she had been sedated, but her shoulders and neck felt cool and soothed. She was healing.

More or less. There was a presence in her mind or gut she wasn’t ready for, and she knew full well that everyone had seen it. What did that Imperial officer think? Hell, what did Theron think? He had refused to be near her when she’d gone in…

She heard a voice. Wynston’s, low and confident. And Vette chirping in response. And Theron, balm for what remaining wounds she had.

She opened her eyes. Theron noticed first. “Hey, she’s back,” he said, with bravado. “Let’s get you out of here.”

He stepped up to hit the release on the tank. A medical droid nosed in and Theron waved it away, instead reaching to drain the tank and open the side. Ruth stepped out, as confidently as she could.

“Got that?” said Theron, offering a robe.

“Thanks.” Ruth stretched and enjoyed being on her own power. “Wynston,” she said, “I see you kept the home front stable.”

“Despite its best efforts. How are you?”

“Working on it.” She turned to Vette. “I didn’t know you would stop by.”

“All the interesting conversationalists were here,” she said airily. “No big deal.”

“Right.” She still wasn’t sure where she stood with her once-friend. But this was a promising point. And, finally, she turned to Theron. “Am I glad to see you,” she said. “How are you?”

He smiled unconvincingly. “Just got better.”

She tilted her head, unsure what that meant. “I mean it.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, and shook his head.

Wynston coughed delicately. “Vette, why don’t we go find something at the cantina. I’m still practicing my toleration of fizzy drinks.”

“Right there with you,” said Vette. The two of them strolled out, a pairing scaled rather shorter than the pair they left behind.
Ruth, frowning, turned to Theron. “Should we head back home?”

“Yeah. Come on.”

She fell into step beside him. He was the one who always kept pace at her side, never behind her. It was nice. “How long was I out?”

“Two and a half days. We managed to keep the galaxy together that long, anyway.”

“Good. I am feeling better. I screwed that fight up, badly.”

“You think?”

They walked in silence while Ruth contemplated the wall between them. “I’m glad you’re okay,” she said. “For a minute back there I thought they’d hurt you.”

“Takes more than a half-dozen frightened first lieutenants to keep me down. It helps that five of them were completely stunned by you.” He looked around. “Anyway, Vette really sounded worried. She said she only ever saw you get that kind of dosage once.”

“Darth Ekkage. Belsavis. I remember it clearly.”

“Yeah? Vette didn’t say how you got out of it.”

Quinn. That was how. He had shown the seasoned Sith the business end of a thermal detonator. “The Jedi got a lucky shot in. Did she mention that part?”

“You voluntarily working with a Jedi? Yeah. At that point I started assuming she was making it up.”

“We work with Jedi now,” she said, a little defensively.

“You snipe at Larr Gith until she leaves.”

“Yes, but sometimes I’m doing useful things while we’re sniping.”

“Babe,” he said, and chuckled. “I wouldn’t say you crave the spotlight. But once you’ve got it you are terrible at sharing.”

“You think so?”

“If we go through the catalogue of people who are remotely near your level, the one you’re on best terms with is Darth Scythia.”

“She threatened to kill me the last time we talked.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe I should learn to throw Force lightning. It seems to be all the rage.”

“Can you do that? Study it? I thought you kind of had to be born knowing.”

“Force Lightning can be learned. It takes time and discipline. If you didn’t start early, you’re probably too busy staying alive to get into it later. But stars, would it ever surprise my enemies. They think because I dedicated my life to internal mastery, I can’t directly impact things that aren’t bodies. Right now they’re right.”
“You can’t use the Light Side of the Force for what you’re talking about.” He made it sound like a bald warning. Well, it was.

Ruth sighed while her past frustrations tumbled hurriedly back where they belonged. “No. Good point. Just…for once I’d like to make them feel what they do to me.”

“Revenge is a quick path to nowhere good,” he said. “Learned that one from the Jedi. The ones that didn’t annoy you.”

“I’m sure your old master would annoy me if I met him.”

“He’s a good man.”

“I might be irritable, you never know.”

He slid an arm around her waist. “Nah.”

They reached their quarters and Ruth headed immediately for the bedroom to find some clothes. Theron followed her in.

“You sure you’re okay?” he said.

“I’m fine.” She set them aside and walked up to him to twine her arms around his neck. “I’m fine, dearest.” She leaned into him and turned up until he kissed her. “Mm,” she moaned instinctively, suddenly surprised by the perfection of their contact.

He jerked away, leaving her lips cold. “You must be tired,” he said, abruptly rough. “Why don’t I tuck you in.”

“I’ve been sleeping for days.”

“So take the time to process. A lot just happened, Ruth.”

She studied his transformation and couldn’t understand it. “Did I miss something?”

“No. I don’t think you did.” He scowled. “I’ve had three days to think about this. You’ve had less than six hours.”

“I hate having to play catchup. You know that.”

“Just this once.” He touched her cheek and gave another hollow smile. “Get some rest, babe.”

“Okay.” She wanted to get back to ops, to fit back into everything that was there. Everything that wasn’t Quinn’s idea of a mission. Everything she really belonged to now. But, Theron was right, she had some processing to do first. Did he really think her commitment to him had shaken for one second? He should know better than that by now. It went without saying.

So no, she wouldn’t say it. Not until she understood why she’d been made to.

*  

“Ruth,” said Wynston, “do you have an hour?”

“Uh,” said Ruth. “Let’s get through the briefing and lunch. After that, maybe?”

“Fair enough. My quarters.”
Ruth headed to Wynston’s door at the appointed time. He answered promptly. He was wearing the
rusty waist-length jacket she had saved him in, all those months ago. A clinging undershirt, plain
black fatigues, but his red eyes were brighter and his light blue skin clearer than ever. “Come in,”
he said. He didn’t offer her a drink, for once, and she didn’t ask.

She remembered his quarters from a previous visit. The bar in the corner was gone, replaced by a
muted rug and a loveseat. Otherwise there was a chair, a shelf, a bed. There was a refresher off one
corner. That was all he had and all, as far as she could tell, he needed.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the loveseat, and pulled up his own chair to face her. He leaned
forward, forearms on knees. “How are you feeling?”

“Like everyone’s on tenterhooks around me,” she said. “Look, I know I didn’t come out of that
Geth raid smelling like a fonth, but this is getting out of hand.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Ruth, you’re one of my oldest friends. By acquaintance,
not age.”

“And you’re one of mine.”

He smiled crookedly. “You have always held me to the highest standards.” He extended a hand
until she took his, and returned them together to rest. “Which is why I have to ask. Are you in love
with Quinn?”
I'm Not Unreasonable

Chapter Summary

Ruth, with Wynston's prodding, deals with Quinn and reaches out to Theron. (Wynston, Ruth, Quinn, Theron, Lana, Scythia, Rylon Niral)

Ruth stiffened. “That’s not funny,” she said over a roaring in her ears.

“No,” said Wynston. “It’s not. Are you in love with him?”

“Don’t be silly. Obviously I’m not.”

“And when he crooked his finger, you leaped across the galaxy to…?”

“I would do that for any of my friends.”

Wynston shook his head. “Malavai Quinn is not your friend. He was your underling, your lover, the father of your child…but he was never your friend. Those aren’t the terms he’s offering. Can you imagine sitting like this with him and not ripping his clothes off?”

“I don’t appreciate—”

“Yes or no question. Are you in love with him?”

“I’m grateful to him.”

Wynston waited.

“I will always love what he’s done for Rylon. That doesn’t count.”

“Yes or no. Are you in love with him?”

Ruth bit her lip. She didn’t say anything.

“It isn’t my job to judge. This is just you. Are you in love with him?”

She looked away.

“It’s okay. I don’t want to hear it, either. Question two. Do you have a problem with that?”

“What does that mean?”

“If you don’t, my advice to you is going to change. Do you have a problem with loving him?”

“It hasn’t…it was true, which I’m not saying, it hasn’t changed anything.”

“It’ll cost you Theron.”

She continued looking off to one side. “What happened to not judging?”

“I’m not. I’m observing. Those two won’t share, unless they both develop a liberal streak I wasn’t
“He deserves to have Rylon. He deserves that chance.”

“Rylon is a distraction for this part. We’ll get to him later. This is between you and Quinn. Yes or no. Do you have a problem?”

Her heart throbbed. Without considering Rylon…without considering Rylon she would be free. She could leave Quinn behind. It would stop being complicated. This humiliating interrogation would be over. “Yes,” she whispered.

“That’s progress,” he said gently. “Do you understand now why I’m doing this?”

Ruth hunched her shoulders. “Because you haven’t kicked anyone in the teeth recently and you missed the fun?”

“I spoke with Theron while you were under. He was under the impression that you dropped everything to put yourself in danger at Quinn’s side, while sweeping Theron out of the way. That you worked very closely.”

And she knew exactly the moment he was complaining about. “Oh, for spite’s sake. Quinn was shielding me from a grenade.”

“He was in a position with just him and you, in mortal danger, and you had no problem with making Theron watch from a distance. And it’s not just that. It’s what I saw after. Ruth, you came out from a near-death experience and he was the last person in the room you turned to.”

“That’s stupid. He knows I was glad to see him.”

“You’d be surprised what he knows after watching you long enough. You need to stop inviting Quinn. And start ignoring him when he invites you.”

“Fine. So he won’t come back.”

“Then you recognize the problem. Good. What else needs to be peeled off? Where else do you see him?”

“I have to see him while supervising Rylon’s calls. There’s no way around that.”

“Can Theron manage? Can I?”

“I’m his mother. All policy questions go through me.”

“So I take notes to bring to you after. It’s roundabout but it can work. I’m willing to do that.”

Her senses were reeling from both the buzzing in her ears and the heat in her cheeks. “This is stupid. You really think the solution is for me to stop looking at him.”

“I think every time you start looking at him you’re hurting more than just yourself.”

He had sprung his trap, and the teeth were in every direction. She looked for an out off to one side and didn’t see it. “Are you just doing this so people will forget your little problem?”

He took the accusation in stride. “I’m doing this because I wish someone had done it for me. You didn’t know to, you couldn’t have known, but it would’ve prevented a lot of heartache if someone
just sat me down to say, this is the path to destruction, and you have the capability to turn away from it. Ruth, I can watch you pushing me away and I can watch you hurting a man whose only infraction was loving you, but I can’t watch you sell yourself to redeem a debt that someone else is abusing to get to you. You owe him gratitude. Pay that back to his son, not to him. If he’s got the faintest blush of objective intelligence left he’ll understand. And even if he chooses not to, that doesn’t and can’t change the terms unless you let it.”

Something raced in to freeze her breath, a little late. “Wynston, you can’t tell Theron we even started this conversation.”

“I won’t. I told you, this is for you. We make a plan. You talk through whatever you need out of your system. And then we go out there and don’t ever have to talk about it again. As long as that plan is put into action.”

“Plan? How do I plan to stop caring about someone?”

“Does caring mean he gets to tell you where to go and when?”

“No.”

“Does caring mean he can summon you face to face any time he wants?”

“No.”

“Does caring mean crawling back into the limited role he loved you in? Ever again?”

“N-no.”

“I have spent my life running into situations, changing something, I hope for the better, and running out again. I care about the outcomes. But I would have died of exhaustion a long time ago if I gave them a claim over me.”

“Hit and run my husband?”

“Ex-husband. Get out of the wreckage he caused and walk away on your own power. You’re a warrior. You understand how important that is.”

She thought about it. And she still hated the entire conversation. But… “Was Theron…really very angry?”

“He’s not angry with you. But he might start if this keeps up.”

“Wynston…no. No. Don’t you understand? Every day I wake up in a galaxy where Malavai Quinn would gladly drop everything he’s doing, grant me all his support, be a father to my son, and make love to me like nothing else has ever existed.” The thought left her warmer than it should have. “Every day I wake up into that galaxy and choose Theron. Why doesn’t he understand that?”

“At a guess? Because every day, you’re still weighing that tradeoff.”

“I’m trying!”

“You can try without Quinn in the room.”

“You’ve wanted to give me this lecture since the day you met him. You’re just happy it’s finally justified.”
“I am not happy about this. Maybe I could have been more assertive back when we were both much younger, back when I just thought he was a self-important racist buffoon. But we all made our respective choices, and now we’re here, and if you’re going to let him go you’d better make it soon.”

“Wynston, when I think about just not seeing him again…”

“Yes?”

Ruth struggled back toward calm. Just saying no. Not being there. Not wondering, each and every time, how to make him grateful, as though making him grateful was the point. As though, after all this time, she couldn’t take a breath until he did. She startled herself. “It’s like I can breathe.”

Wynston relaxed a little. “See? There are good things coming.”

“All it cost me was this mess.” She looked at her hands, still resting in his. “I don’t think I can ever look you in the eye again.”

“Try it,” he said gently. “I do not think less of you for trying to be a good person the only way you knew how. And frankly I have only respect for any effort you make to set things right again.” She made herself look into his red eyes. He returned with a crooked little smile. “Not so bad?” he said.

“I wish I could’ve intervened for you, but I don’t think I could have managed.”

“Oh, no, I got vicious about drinking. I doubt our friendship would have survived that one. You’re reasonable by comparison.”

“I’m an idiot.”

“Remind me to tell you about the time I fell in love with a terrorist and gave her a security clearance. Then we can talk about idiocy.”

“Yes, but you kicked her out in the end.”

“Which is how I know that you can. It gets better, Ruth.”

She squeezed and dropped his hands. She stood, and he did too, which was how she figured she had permission to hug him. It was easier than looking at him, anyway. He accepted her chin over his shoulder and pulled her close. “It gets better,” he repeated.

“I’m trusting you.”

He squeezed harder. “Good.”

*

Quinn was waiting outside Ruth’s door when she got back. Theron stepped out at the same time.


It was the wrong thing to say. Theron set his jaw and stalked past. Quinn watched him, eyes just slightly wide, and looked back to her.

She held up a hand to forestall commentary. “When I was in there, what little time I was conscious, I had some time to think about what happened back there.” She backed up a half step. “Don’t touch me. If there is ever, ever another grenade, just let me take it. Understand?”
He tightened his jaw. “No, my lord. I don’t.”

“I know what happened back there. You dragged me into my past. To when it was our past. And I’m here to tell you, that can’t happen again. You can’t be my right-hand man. I can’t be your avenging angel. I know, I offered you my help, and I will send you resources the next time you need it, but you and I aren’t riding forth again.”

“Is it me you so object to?” he said softly. “Or the fact that you filled your old role so perfectly?”

“Do you think I’m nineteen years old and crazy about you? Because neither one of those things is true. I did my best and we got the bad guy. The fact that I had to do it the old way, the Sith way, that’s a problem, not a point of pride. The fact that I got so caught up in the fight I needed you to watch my back is a weakness. I’ve stopped pretending it’s some kind of badge of honor.”

“You think the agent who distracted you is somehow better qualified.”

“Theron is someone I chose! Someone I fought for! You’re something that happened to me!”

Quinn started as if slapped. “My lord?”

“I believe I’ve made my point. Theron will be overseeing Rylon’s call next week. Dismissed.”

“My lord, I saved your life.”

“Should I count the number of missions you talked me into that went wrong? Does that factor in to your score count?”

“This didn’t go wrong, my lord. You were successful. You were magnificent.”

“I was a killer. And you’ll always be right there to enable it.”

“If you’ll have me,” he said grimly.

“Leave.”

“My lord, if followup care is required….”

“I have droids. Get out of my sight. And don’t you dare chase my son down tonight.” She had to let Theron have a moment’s peace. He hadn’t gotten that today.

Quinn walked out. Ruth went for her own door. There was no one inside.

* 

The decision was a twist in her gut but a weight off her shoulders. There was still so much to sort out about Rylon. Still so much, but she had her start and it was time to bring Theron in.

He didn’t answer his holo. Ruth held it, uncomprehending, for a minute or more while it beeped. Still he didn’t answer.

She left a notification and headed to ops. Lana was there, studying the big board.

“Lana,” said Ruth, “do you know where Theron ended up?”

“You just missed him. He was on his way to a scouting assignment in the Mid Rim.”
Ruth’s insides twisted. “The Mid Rim? How long will he be gone?”

“That depends on what he finds when he gets there. It’ll be a week at the soonest. Did he…not tell you?”

“It must have slipped his mind,” Ruth said numbly. “Is he incommunicado the whole time?”

“I…don’t know,” said Lana. The shift in her eyes was just momentary. “I’m sure he’ll holo back once he’s settled.”

“Lana.” Ruth mindfully unclenched her hands. “You already knew where he was going. And you knew I didn’t know. And you let him walk out without telling me.”

Lana put her fists on her hips and swept a glare around the room. “And if I did? You didn’t brief me on your little jaunt to see Lord Geth.”

“That was different! That was personal.”

“And so is this. As I expect you would already know if you weren’t distracted.”

“Quinn’s not going to distract me anymore.”

“Good.” Lana relaxed and sighed. “I don’t like seeing the two of you at odds, but I’d be lying if I said I don’t understand Theron’s perspective right now.”

“Quinn is out. I asked Wynston to see him on his way. He’s not coming back.”

“And Rylon?”

“I’ll sort it out. Wynston’s willing to play chaperon. Quinn hates him as much as he hates Theron, but Wynston has a thick skin and less personal stake.”

Lana raised a hand to her mouth, conspicuously failing to stifle a smile. “Is there nothing that man’s not capable of?”

“Well, he’s still good at blunt truths to the head when called for.” Ruth smiled wryly. “He’s very good at that.”

Somewhere, hyperspace was wrapping round the only thing that mattered. Ruth came to Lana’s side to see what could be done that day.

Lana, mercifully, had only local assignments for Ruth. After supervision of a few mundane matters she came off duty and returned to her quarters, and tucked Rylon in.

Her and Theron’s quarters, dammit. Not less so just because he wasn’t there. She sat down at the console in her bedroom. She wondered, vaguely, how long it had been since she’d written a letter. Not a status text, but a real letter. Probably before her father died, close to eleven years ago. Did one lose a skill left unused for so long? She didn’t just need words, she needed persuasion, and she felt achingly lacking in it as she sat in her dark and silent quarters.

She typed, slowly at first, fast at times, frantically backspacing more than once. On balance the document grew rather than shortened through the night.

At dawn she pressed send. Three minutes later she rushed back to the console. “Take that back,”
she muttered out loud, mashing the control for withdrawing a sent mail.

The console blinked. “Mail already cached by recipient. It cannot be recalled.”

“Oh,” she sighed, and went back to bed.

*

“Ruth Niral’s answering service.”

Quinn turned up on holo. “Is that…Agent? What are you doing?”

“Answering Ruth’s holo,” said Wynston. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

The officer glared. “I don’t have time for this. Bring her in.”

“Ah. Hm. Slight subtlety going on there. You don’t tell her where to show up. Ever. Now, was there a message you wanted me to relay?”

“Nothing I want you to hear.”

Wynston’s eyes glittered. “I’ll remember that. And so will the entire committee of people assigned to deal with you. You should be honored, even her tax accountant gets less scrutiny.”

“I am not her tax accountant!”

“No, if you were you’d probably be fired. Good day, Captain.”

Quinn stepped forward. “My son-!”

“At the times you agreed to.” Wynston nodded, a promise of sorts. “I’m under strict orders not to interfere. I’m not unreasonable, Quinn. Just unsympathetic.”

Quinn’s jaw worked. “I suppose I should be grateful for what I have,” he said tightly.

“That would be appropriate, yes.”

“You’re enjoying this!”

“As much as I ever enjoy talking to you. It’s so nice when I know exactly how it’s going to end.” Wynston showed his teeth. “I’ll bring your son when it’s time to call, because he adores you, and I won’t get in your way, because he adores you. Consider it a token of my goodwill toward the parent I can stand.”

*

Rylon was tossing his red rubber ball and catching it with the Force. “I’m getting good,” he said.

“I can see that,” said Quinn, watching every movement in the vague readiness to jump in himself. “Does Ruth teach you?”

“Every day. Stupid early in the morning.” Rylon rolled his eyes, then perked up. “I found a combat manual for the Imperial Army.”

“Oh?” Quinn was a little surprised that anyone would leave that lying around. “What were you looking for there?”
“I’m too short,” Rylon reported unhappily. “None of the workouts work.”

“Get someone to help you with adapting the equipment. Training accidents are only glamorous in…well, they’re never glamorous.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You will never have to be a soldier,” said Quinn. “As a Sith Lord you’ll have many more privileges.”

“But you’re a soldier.”

If there was a solid line of reasoning there his heart was too full to find it. “There is that.”

Wynston was coiled up in one corner of the holo view, but he kept his mouth shut and his eyes on a datapad. It was the best hour Quinn had ever spent in his presence.

*

The big board in ops scrolled. The Alliance officers looked at it. “We might be able to flush Arcann out if your fleet can hit that system hard enough,” said Lana.

“A risk,” said Scythia over holo. “Interesting decision. But we are all in this together. Consider it done.”

“When exactly are you going to call in that favor?” Wynston said idly.

“When I want it fulfilled. Don’t complain about a done deal, my friend.”

The strike didn’t move Arcann, but it made the Eternal Empire hurt, which was almost as good.

*

Theron’s scouting lasted for five days before he failed to check in. Ruth was on it before Lana had finished reading the last known signal.

He had gone missing in a tribal Wookiee village, a many-layered treehouse with walls and roof of dry leaves and twigs. A day and a half of agonized hyperspace travel later, Ruth walked in the front door. She wore her weapons openly and didn’t move to touch them. A protocol droid, an afterthought, tottered behind her.

“They say you may see the great chief now,” said the droid.

Ruth nodded and walked through the wispy leaf door.

The hall was large, built in the space between two huge boles. Wookiees with bowcasters stood at intervals all around. On a high chair at the far side sat a broad-shouldered Wookiee holding a goblet. He studied Ruth and roared.

“The great chief wishes to know why you have come to Kashyyyk,” said the droid.

“Great Chief. I come in friendship.”

“What does hairless one want?”

“An ally of mine, a great warrior, was captured by your people. I wish to secure his release.”
“Great warrior!” The unholy noise might have been laughter, and it was taken up by the guards. “Thief was captured sneaking in the night. He will be made just.”

The droid blipped. “There is considerable meaning surrounding ‘being made just’. None of it is healthy.”

“What justice do you require?”

“He will be made just!”

“Is it a fight? A ransom? Under what circumstances will you release him to me?”

She was hearing something. A snapping, low but piercing, as of someone snapping their fingers in another room. It was tapping out the rhythm of a song, one she knew well. One she had danced to with Theron, more than once. It was just out of sight...somewhere close.

“You may watch justice made. You will understand.”

“Great Chief. I beg a moment. I require meditation.”

“What is outlander meditation?”

“Be peaceful.” Ruth knelt. She focused.

She didn’t have to search long. Among the faint impressions of Force signatures, one identity gleamed in her mind like aurodium. Straining now, twining every ounce of emotion into a string to reach to him, she focused on tracing down to touch his hand. It moved the moment she made a physical nudge. It reached up to wrap around something. Ruth focused hard and crushed where he indicated. Her control slipped an instant later. She withdrew herself, trying to conserve, trying not to snap off. The Force pushed her like a very large, very dumb, and very implacable animal. She let go, praying it was enough.

“Great Chief,” she said. “I have seen what I need to see. Prepare your justice.”

And, right on cue, Theron burst through the twig wall.

Ruth raised her hand. Quick shots of focus, one for each bowcaster leveled at her beloved, a snap, a crunch, some running.

A lot of running.

“Learn anything good?” she panted as they ran.

“Yeah, I’ll report on it as soon as I get feeling back in my wrists.”

“Theron... was that them or me?”

“It was them. I’m fine. Let’s go.”

But when they and a Force-dragged protocol droid made it to the ship and took off, and Ruth cut Theron’s bindings, and they made it into orbit, he didn’t go for the console. Instead he limped toward the bed.

“Are you okay?” she said softly.

“Sit with me,” he said. His tone of voice poured relief over her. “I probably could’ve handled that
better,” he said.

“I understand,” she said, edging her hips next to his. “I sent you a letter.”

“Yeah, I…”

“You didn’t read it.”

“Well, I…no. I didn’t. How’d you know?”

“You’d be too busy looking for a crisis to fix.” She smiled shakily. “You wouldn’t get to it until the action was over.”

“How well you know me. Should I read it now?”

“I would feel stupid watching you do it.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It cost me a full night’s sleep. Make of that what you will.”

“Okay.” He pulled it up, and Ruth, butterflies gathering, turned away to wait.

Dearest Theron,

I’m sorry if this is a mess. Korriban didn’t assign many practice essays.

I love you. Foremost and always. You taught me how to trust after I had given up. You taught me how to love when I thought I was too broken to try.

Don’t let this be broken.

I took you for granted. I understand that and I regret it. I thought that thinking of you as a part of me would bring us closer, when really it just made you easier to neglect. I don’t take care of myself. That’s not your responsibility, but it explains a little of how I hurt you.

Hurting you. I would say something dramatic about all the crazy things I would do rather than hurt you, but I gave myself the lie. I took bad advice for bad ends, and I don’t say that to shift the blame. I was wrong. And maybe I was wrong before I sold out to an errand of vengeance.

The darkness is constantly with me, always ready and willing. For tasks like this, for anything. I know it like I know my own heartbeat. It’s not that I said yes to it. It’s that for a few minutes I stopped saying no. I pushed you away long enough for that silence to tell, and for that I am sorry.

I shut you out. I took a mission I knew was empty from a man I knew was wrong. I was the Wrath again, in a world that doesn’t need more Wraths. I conspired with the last person in the galaxy I should be close to, and made you watch. I’m sorry.

I didn’t know whether to mention him. But the fact is, my debt can never be paid in the currency he wants, and it’s no use trying. I’m cutting him off. Please forgive me for not doing it sooner.

I love you. I love you, and for as long as you’ll have me I will be here. I love you, and I hope to see you soon.

Ever yours,
Theron had slouched, reading. He straightened at the end. He gave Ruth a wary look. “Ruth,” he said throatily.

“I’m sorry. It was too much.”

“Sh-sh. Sh.” He twisted beside her and kissed her, gently at first, rhythmically, fully. She opened her arms to him and he slid in close. “Apology accepted,” he whispered. He set a hand at the small of her back and slowly bent her down over it, leaving her spine arched and her breath short. His fingers were sliding through her hair and his mouth ran light and soft to her jaw, to the edge of her high neck. She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed until he made a quiet complaining noise.

He pulled his head back, grimacing. “I…may need food, water, and medical attention before we go on.”

“Oh,” she said. “I’m sorry, I…”

“No more apologies. Come with me.”

She slipped her hand into his. “Always.”

The tail had been following Calline since Nar Shaddaa and she knew it. The weird part was, whoever it was didn’t come after her when T5-M7 was elsewhere and she was alone in the spaceport. Instead, whoever it was followed her ship back out to space.

Someone didn’t want her, and didn’t want her ship without her, as she had left it unattended for the better part of three days. Someone just wanted to follow her. And there was only one reason for someone to want to follow her. Somebody else was finding their way to Odessen, and Calline would put money down that they weren’t doing it to be friends. She wished, for roughly the ten thousandth time, that old Gault’s trick with the body double could be used to walk and talk, just long enough to fake someone out. Instead she scanned the ship trailing her into orbit, had T5-M7 measure all she could about its operation and radio signatures, and landed normally.

She had a fair amount of access to Odessen’s systems. Most contractors didn’t, and she suspected it wasn’t her slicing skills that got her the rest, but nobody talked about Wynston getting access for her. He did her every favor he dared. Why he should care so much for someone he had abandoned twenty-five years ago, she didn’t know.

She left T5-M7 guarding the hallway. She doubled back and forth, keeping an eye out, leading a long chase toward the ops center where any sensible infiltrator would try to reach. Then she eased into the shadows.

There weren’t enough of them, so she started climbing.

The conference was starting in ops. Calline listened with half an ear. Military dispositions, her brother’s voice asserting its comfortable authority over the situation at most turns. They listened to him, really listened. She had been the scum of Imperial space for years. Even now that she picked her own jobs…well, what must it be like to be listened to?

She watched. A lull came in the traffic outside. A lull, and the first person to enter it skulked in in a hurry.

Calline dropped.

The man crumpled to a hard impact below. It was a Rattataki, noticeably smaller than Calline but sturdy. He bit her, hard, and she grunted and rolled, dragging a few silver chains anchored by piercings and rejoicing in the yelp of pain.

Blaster fire impacted beside the pair. Calline grunted. Somebody had better be damn sure what they were doing. When her opponent started biting a vial open she punched it clear of his face. He went for a knife. When she couldn’t rip it from his hand she rolled and tossed him, trying for a better grip.
Someone smaller and lighter blue dove in in professional silence.

Calline gripped an arm. The other – Wynston – hugged the Rattataki, arms and all, while Calline plucked a knife from the shaking hand. She followed it up with a hard cross to the Rattataki’s face. She wasn’t sure how police actions worked around here, but beating up people who intended her harm seemed like a fair thing to do.

A lightsaber activated behind her. Five different responses rippled through Calline’s body. She didn’t go after Sith, but she’d had to make some retreats before.

Wynston wasn’t moving to counter whoever was carrying that lightsaber. On the off chance that he was correct about that, she went back to punching the Rattataki.

“Let me take him,” said Ruth. She walked between the Chiss and hoisted the Rattataki by the front of his shirt. “You and I are going to talk,” she said, supremely disingenuous.

Wynston looked at Calline. Calline looked like Wynston. “Are you okay?” they said.

Wynston recovered first. “I’m fine. Are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Good. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She sat up and rolled her shoulders. “Regular day on the job.”

Wynston nodded. “Did you see where he came from? Was he alone?”

“It was just him.” And she was a professional; she would know. She glared to emphasize the point.

“I’m glad.”

Ruth wasn’t looking at her quarry. “We all owe you,” she said.

“Bonus pay?” said Calline.

Wynston laughed low and richly. “I’ll arrange it.” Then he reached over and touched her shoulder.

She wondered, unwillingly, which person that assassin would have gone for first. No one came after a Sith with a knife. That was for more ordinary prey.

Wynston was smiling at her. “If we don’t hug now I’m not sure we’re ever going to.”

“Hm,” she said. He was looking healthy and well-fed and alert and fifteen seconds ago he had jumped in without hesitation to keep a knife out of her. She gave up and hugged him, hard. Idiot. Runaway. Reckless, neglectful, callous, absent, absent for so long, and willingly.

Brother.

*  

Wynston was laying a little apart from Lana. It was very warm. Her fingertips made nonsense patterns on the inside of his wrist. He wondered whether she felt the pounding of his pulse.

“Is this useful for you?” he said. “From a fueling perspective.”
“Yes,” she said unselfconsciously. “Not my usual fare, I'll admit. Is it good for you? And I don't mean the part you can get from just any woman.”

“Lana...here, with you, I am happy. And I don't mean three square meals and a sprinkling of geopolitical influence happy, I mean madly, selfishly, recklessly, impossibly happy.” He paused. He had broken one of the rules. There had always been a rule about letting on what you were really thinking. “How's that for oversharing?” he said sheepishly.

She twisted to kiss his hand. “I feel the same.”

“Sometimes I wonder when the mission's going to interrupt this.”

“You know the mission comes first. I know the mission comes first. But whatever it is, I know we can face that together.”

“Why did I waste so much time not being in love with you? I'm thirty-seven. I should have done this half a lifetime ago. Not least because I could have extended this longer back then.”

“Longer than that? I would eventually need to stop for food and drink. I was a different woman.”

“I was a stupid man.”

“We've grown.”

“I know.”

“You're really thirty-seven?”

“You're one of a maximum of nine people who knows that for sure, and six of those are related to me.”

“Keeper?”

“Yes.”

“And Keeper?”

“Yes.”

“Ha.”

Wynston cocked his head, the better to see her smile. “What?”

“I got you to say something about another woman.”

“Yes, the torrid affair we conducted over nine years of her expressing how repugnant she found me. We had a marvelously productive relationship. It ended.”

“Repugnant? To your face? Really?”

“Yes. I didn't mind, lots of Imperials find scrawny aliens repugnant.”

“She didn't know what she was missing.”

“Oh, I'm sure she had the gist of it on a holofeed somewhere. It was never enough to get her, ah, personally involved. Why are we talking about this? You're the woman who's here, who was here
at the right time for the right reasons. You’re the woman who never punished me for being who I
am. Even though as a Human and a Sith you had every right.”

“No wonder you like Ruth so much.”

Alarms started screaming. Wynston sat up. He looked at Lana. “Something you want to say?” he
said, dead neutral.

She looked obviously innocent. “Just an observation. You realize she doesn’t know you like I do.”

“What, because she doesn’t think I still have a pragmatic streak a parsec wide? I realize she doesn’t
know my full playbook, and I think we all benefit from that blind spot.”

“You have a dark side, Wynston. One that I know and she never will.”

“Does she have to? Ruth has always lived in this privileged state where her power defines her
options. She has no dark side because she has always dictated the position of the light. That’s just
what she gets by being that powerful. When I want someone to understand what it’s like to face
moral terms for what they are instead of what we could wish them to be, it’s true, it’s not her I go
to.”

“She’ll never have what you keep in that cage.”

“I know. Honestly I didn’t think you wanted it.”

“I want all of you.”

“You’re the one I come back to.” He kissed her. “Has this really been on your mind?”

“Off and on. I know you don’t like talking about your ex-lovers.”

“She’s a very current connection. I understand.”

“But you want me.”

Wynston ran his hands over the curve of her hips. He traced nonsense on her legs, slid up to her
belly, her arms, her shoulders, back down, gentle but unhesitating. “I want you,” he whispered.

“More than anything I’ve ever known, Lana, your mind, your body, the way you breathe, the times
I take that away. I can be as extravagant as you want, or just cut to the chase and say that I love
you. And that if you, knowing me, still want me…then here we are. Two cynical old hands. Career
liars. Cleverly disguised misanthropists.”

“Wynston,” she murmured.

“Yes?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

*

“Catch.”

“Wh–” said Tebbith. The silver cube was arcing toward his chest and he caught it in both hands.

“Captain Vortena! What is this?”

“Fell into my lap while I was out on training exercises. I can’t read it. I thought you might.”
“It’s very old,” said Tebbith, turning it over and eyeing its ornate bronzium inlays.

“So was the abandoned transfer station we found it in. I’ll send you the full report if you want.”

“I’d like that. –It’s beautiful.” Tebbith reached out in the Force and found it already coiling comfortably around the enclosed brightness. “You weren’t in any danger, I hope?”

“Nah. Space. Practically my living room. You like it?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Tebbith laughed sheepishly. “Yes. May I add it to the collection?”

“That’s what it’s there for.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Ah. Hm. Koth. Just Koth.”

Tebbith hesitated. “Koth,” he conceded. “I’m not on a first-name basis with a lot of people.”

He smiled that smile that always looked like he was reconsidering, but he didn’t turn away. “I kind of figured. I’ll be seeing you, Tebbith.”

“Aren’t you in town until tonight?”

Koth looked genuinely surprised. “A few days, actually.”

“Stay for supper. Tell me about your travels. I…lead a very boring life here.”

Koth grinned. “An invitation, Master Jedi?”

Tebbith took a steadying breath. “I don’t see why not. You regale me and I disappoint you.” After all, he was a very dull man. “Is that fair?”

“A person can’t learn as much as you and have nothing to say for it. We’ll continue this discussion.”

**

It was a lull of peace, strangely. Little progress in the war, but Wynston was walking with head high, Tebbith was reading situation reports and offering advice, Rylon was reporting his studies to his father as fast as he could make them; Scythia kept her quiet; Vette didn’t avoid the place, Calline offered status reports to her big brother with more word count than strictly necessary, and Larr Gith was racking up PR triumphs throughout the known galaxy.

It was a lull of peace, strangely, and everyone felt it.

**

Ruth took the holo in the big projector in her quarters. Theron was out; she had every privacy.

She made sure it wasn’t Quinn, and answered.

Senya’s figure came up. Ruth tensed, but there was no sign of Arcann. She made a note to check with command to make sure no one was on their way to Odessen. What did this mean? Only one way to know.
“Ruth,” said the tall figure. She was in her modified Zakuulian knight armor. She looked tired. “Greetings.”

“Senya,” said Ruth. “How are you? Where are you?”

“You’ll understand if I don’t tell you,” Senya said dryly. “I just…wanted to call.”

“Your son. Have you found an answer for him?” An answer that didn’t make him a megalomaniacal dictator?

“I think I have. There’s hope that he can find healing here. I can’t stop the war with Zakuul. But for the first time I have some hope that it will spare him. That you will spare him.”

He had killed millions. He had taken five years of her life away. “So long as he’s a threat to innocent lives, I can’t offer him grace.”

“Then my search continues.” She tilted her head, keeping her gaze steady on Ruth. “This thing, grace. No one talked about it in Zakuul.”

“Not many talk about it here. But if there were a way to forgive him, Senya, I would.” For Senya’s sake. Not ever for his.

“I…I hear you found your son.”

“Yes. He was rescued from Jedi hands.”

“I can’t imagine. But here we are.” Senya took a deep breath, and the weariness in her eyes did not lessen. “Maybe there’s hope for all four of us.”

“I hope so,” said Ruth, and meant it.

“I should go. May the Force be with you.”

“Force free you. And those you hold dear.”

* *

“When’s the last time you got dressed up for dinner?” said Theron.

Ruth looked up from the lightsaber she had been meditating over. “Wrath regalia?” she said. “About seven years. Five of them don’t count.”

“Civilian regalia. You know, skirts, or whatever they’re wearing these days.”

Ruth smiled in spite of herself. “Twelve years. I was very young.”

“And probably the most beautiful person in the room.”

“You didn’t see who I was dancing with.”

Theron cocked an eyebrow. “Am I jealous now? Is that what’s happening?”

She laughed. “No. He’s probably old now anyway.” Let Wynston feel an inexplicable twinge, wherever he was.

“You think it might be fun to gear up again?”
“Theron, what are you getting at?”

“I submit for your consideration: Two days off. Coruscant. I’ll show you my old stomping grounds.”

“And dress up for dinner?”

“If you want.”

“I think I want.”

He gave a little grin. “Really?”

“Yes.”

---

Ten minutes later Ruth burst into the office outside ops. “Lana, I need your help.”

Lana looked up, startled, and half rose. “What is it?”

“I don’t know what to wear.”

Lana froze. “What?”

“Theron asked me someplace and I don’t have anything to wear.”

“I really, really thought this was going to be about the Sullust sector.”

“T’ll help with that. In three days. But first I need something to wear.”

“You’re not exactly my size.” Lana’s hand moved unconsciously to her hip, which among other attributes was noticeably more filled out.

“Do you have an hour? Or two? Or something? Just enough to pick something out. I’m sorry. I don’t know who else to go to.”

“We can get Vette,” said Lana.

“Yes. Good. We should do that. Now.”

“Ruth. Please relax.”

“You’ve known him longer than I have. What does he think is beautiful?”

Ruth had a long and complicated relationship with Theron, but it rarely made her nervous. “If you’re buying a dress for the first time in your life, you’d better pick what you think is beautiful.” Lana looked thoughtful. “Though fair skin like yours is a real candidate for red.”

---

Lana, Ruth, and Vette stood around a small holoprojector. Ruth was pointing.

“No stomach cutouts. Scar tissue.”

“Ah, understood.”
“Back’s still fine,” said Vette. “Unless you picked up more when I wasn’t looking.”

“No hip cutouts,” said Ruth. “I need a weapon.”

“But the draping…”

“I need a little space in the skirt.”

“Clutch with a wrist band,” Lana said firmly. “Believe me.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Vette scoffed. “Or you could not carry murder implements on your hot date? No?”

“I like the high neck…”

“No, you don’t,” said Lana and Vette in unison. Lana continued. “You know I’ve known you for eight years and I’ve never seen your collarbone? Surprise him.”

“He already knows what I look like.”

“Ruth, when it comes to enticement, the space between clothed and naked is anything but linear.”

“How’s this?” said Vette.

Lana looked up. “Oh,” she said softly. The holo image blinked and formed itself to a mannequin of Ruth. Lana kept staring.

“So,” Vette said tactfully, “we’re not actually looking for something to seduce you.”

Lana caught herself. “Ahem. Don’t be ridiculous.” She didn’t look at Ruth.

“Still, that’s one strong vote for,” said Vette, looking back up at the dress. It was red. It had a slim silhouette with a little lace-slashed sweep at the bottom, a low close-molded neckline sliding up to tiny wisp sleeves, with lace panels in the back where scars wouldn’t even show.

“And you?” Ruth said anxiously.

“Hmm,” said Vette. ”If I swung that way, I would be swinging that way real hard right now.”

“Still not into Humans, Vette?”

“Only for the aftercare.”

Lana cleared her throat. “So that’s settled. How’s jewelry?”

---

“I’ll say one thing for Coruscant,” said Ruth, “it’s beautiful from orbit.” Round ripples of lights played out from blazing city centers dotted from horizon to horizon. The atmosphere gleamed, fretted by hundreds of ships coming and going.

Like hers. She locked the navicomputer and watched while Theron took them in.

Ruth considered herself reasonably cosmopolitan, but Coruscant beggared belief. The traffic
streaming in and out of the labyrinthine spaceport, the sheer scale of the concourse, the babble of a hundred languages simultaneously. It was as if Nar Shaddaa grew up and started cleaning up after itself.

She kept her bags in one hand. “Senate building,” said Theron, pointing with his free hand. “The heart of democracy. Having a bad year, I’ll admit. Come on, we’ll get a speeder.” The crowd was already starting to grumble and mutter as people noticed her face. Together they pressed in the direction of the crowd until they reached a rental stand. Heads turned behind them, words rippled, but no one slowed them down.

“There’s no droid,” said Ruth. Droid taxis were the primary conveyances in Kaas City. Few people were licensed to take themselves.

“Nope,” Theron said cheerfully.

“You’re going to drive? In that?” She jerked a thumb toward the nine-slightly-offset-lane throughway outside. She at least had the Force. He only had good reflexes and a lot of nerve. Which, she had to admit, she had relied on in the past.

Theron winked. “For you I’ll even stay in my lane. Not all speeder chases go so nicely.”

He took her up, and then up again, before reaching what appeared to be an actual circle of traffic. He pointed out to one side to an unmarked expanse of duracrete in one of the higher towers.

“Entrance 7B to the headquarters of the SIS. Home sweet home.” He paused. “Until the last three or four times they disavowed me. Does that work like a lightswitch? One, you’re disavowed, two, you’re good again?”

“I really couldn’t guess how your employee handbook worked. Do you regret it? The first few?”

“I was doing the right thing. It’s just too bad that that cost me a nice lounge and pension benefits.”

“Theron…” The speeder had an open top, and the wind was rippling his short hair in ways he would immediately re-master once they landed. His cybernetics gleamed with a color not entirely unlike most of the buildings here, and his tawny eyes for once betrayed no concern whatsoever. He was somebody new here. And it was breathtaking.

“Down under that dome are the huttball fields. Strictly amateur, the pros are a couple of sectors north. It costs a fortune to keep them in one piece.”

“I’m trying to imagine you playing huttball.”

“Winning. Winning at huttball, thank you. Over there are the Nikto Towers. After what happened on Duros most of their population ended up on the orbital cities, but a few sizeable communities resettled there.”

“I can’t imagine a population just doing that on Dromund Kaas.”

“No, but you have us beat for shady and ghoulishly quiet.”

He continued their tour with a little more flair in driving than was strictly necessary. She hung on and listened. His laughter tumbled over the background sounds and under her humming skin.

“Want to head to the hotel?” he said. “I probably should’ve let you take two seconds before we went on the tour.”
“This is fine,” she said, smiling. “Let’s go.”

But when she got there, an hour before their scheduled dinner, she found herself paralyzed. She locked herself in the bathroom with a dress (the ironing droid was busily working itself along its length) and a bracelet and a pair of magnetic earrings…and panicked.

“Ruth?” said Theron, outside. “You in there?”

“Yes,” she said, and bit her lip. She hadn’t dressed like this for a man since she was eighteen years old. And now she was old and it was stupid, so stupid. This wasn’t her. And he didn’t love her for the creature she would be in a red dress.

“You feeling okay?”

Ruth gritted her teeth. He had asked if she wanted a change of pace, and she had said yes, and that was just how it was going to be. She shooed off the ironing droid and started sliding into place.

It came on smooth as satin, startling against her skin. There was just enough give to the skirt to keep her from feeling bound, and the low neck and minimal sleeves felt practically airy. She was accustomed to letting her high-necked dark wardrobe do the talking. Under the circumstances, as she traced the contour of the close-fitted front, she would be doing her own talking tonight.

She added a plain clear crystal cuff, two dangling earrings. She combed her short half-curled hair back toward the nape of her neck, and wondered if he would like it that way.

Finally, with not twenty minutes left to go, she crept out. Theron was standing in the living room, hands in the pockets a trimly cut suit coat, looking at the traffic outside. Ruth cleared her throat, and he turned.

He looked down. He looked up. And he smiled, a little mischievously. “Can we do this every day?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “can I expense this?”

“You look amazing.”

“You look pretty sharp yourself.”

“Yeah…but I’ll be dreaming of this for weeks.” He picked a light jacket off the bed. “Take this.”

She swung it over her shoulders, then touched his elbow. “So where are we going?”

“Tower just south of here. Olvigian’s. It’s high end. They’re too civilized to stare there.” He nudged open the door and stepped her through. “You are going to blow them all away.”

In later years she would never remember what they ate, or what they talked about, nor even what most of the building looked like. She remembered the sound of his voice. That above all.

And when they had finished eating he offered his elbow and brought her past the dance floor to a balcony looking out over the city-planet. There was no sunset as such, but the sky above was smudging from orange to a distant blue. Beyond that the stars were a cloudy breath spilled over the glimmering atmosphere.

Theron looked out beside her. “I first came here on an SIS assignment. I couldn’t afford an hors d’oeuvres without the company dime. But I got up here, with a wind in steady and a star coming
out, and I thought, if I ever have a Moment, it’s going to be here.”

“I don’t understand. What kind of moment?”

He smiled calmly. “I didn’t know.” He folded his free hand over hers. “Listen, a long time ago you said we couldn’t guarantee anything. I changed my mind. I disagree. I’m more certain of you than I’ve ever been of anything, and I sincerely hope by now you’re sure of me. So I...thought I’d better…” He cleared his throat. “Look, isn’t it time we got married?”

Ruth’s everything continued at the same taut level he had struck. The world’s small background noises rustled as if they had missed the fermata. She listened to them distantly until Theron touched her hand.

“Hey. Ruth?”

He needed an explanation. “I need to bottle this feeling,” she said, “and keep it forever, as proof that sometimes you can have something perfect.”

“Yes? I...it’s kind of a Republic thing, I know, but I got you a ring.” He was pulling a box from his pocket, opening it to reveal a gold band suspending what looked like a white Corusca gem in one edge. “I got a flat profile so you can wear it under your work gloves.”

“You think I’m ever going to hide that under gloves?” She offered her hand and he slid the ring on.

“Got that?”

“I think so.” She held it out and considered it in the light. “I can see colors in it.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, looking at her. “I see that.”

The band’s conductor finished consulting with somebody and stepped up to a microphone. “Ladies and gentlebeings, I have it on good authority that two of our happy guests have just agreed to be happy together! Can I get a little appreciation for our lovebirds?” Polite applause rose. The conductor raised his baton and the band whirled into some sweeping number Ruth had never heard.

Theron laughed quietly. “Well, yes, if you want the most cliché dance number imaginable…”

“We’re going to dance?”

“Oh, I walked right into that, didn’t I.”

She tugged at his elbow. “Come on.”

On the floor he led her with assurance and verve, seeming to begrudge every flourish that took her body from his. At the end he brought her off the floor and back to their table, where his jacket awaited.

She swung it around her shoulders. Its weight kept her more or less attached to the ground. Then, most importantly, she came back to his arm. “Did you get your moment?” she said.

“No more than one.” He smiled. “Let’s go home. Let’s...I’m really glad I went for two days off instead of one.”

Hand in hand they returned to the speeder stand. Theron got Ruth settled and headed around to take the driver’s seat. He eased into traffic and leaned back. “I don’t get to touch you until I’ve stopped
driving, correct?”

“In the interest of not crashing and dying, yes.”

“Roger.” He nodded obliquely. Then he shifted some lever and peeled down to one side, streaking through several lanes of roaring traffic. He levelled out and gunned the engines until they screamed.

Ruth squeaked. “What are you doing?” she yelled.

He grinned. “This is me hurrying, babe. Hold on.”

*End of Book 3: The Lost Boys*

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Chapter Summary

Scenes of the past: Torian asks something of Calline, Pierce preps to wreak mayhem, Tebbith fails someone dear to him, Lana copes with being driven into exile, Darth Scythia makes a deal. Scene of the present: Rylon Niral at Odessen.

February, 11 ATC

The *Boorcati Ch'at Baversco* had come with a partitioned cargo hold, and Calline dedicated part of it to a training room.

She put on the visor helmet and slid the plasma cells out of her blasters, substituting custom sensor rigs. They'd cost a pretty credit but they paid off.

She flicked the helmet on and inside the black visor appeared a projection of a much bigger room, overlaid with two small glowing remotes. The first two were placed on the walls in set calibration patterns; Calline raised her blasters and placed two shots to get started. The remotes flashed and started moving. Time for marksmanship practice.

As always she started with just her left hand, locating the moving images as they came up, bullseyeing them, moving on. Then her right hand. That was harder, much harder, and her computer tracked success rates separately. Then both hands, turning almost continuously while the computer brought up moving targets in every direction.

She stopped when she heard Torian in the doorway, threw a couple of shots at the remaining sim figures, then fixed her blasters on him. "Pew pew," she said.

"You got me," she heard him say.

She holstered her blasters and popped the helmet off, eyeing him curiously.

He lowered his hands, having presumably raised them in surrender while she was still helmet-bound. "Been watching you work," he said. "Outside, too. You're an amazing shot."

"Thanks."

He crossed his arms and leaned in the doorway. "Have to say, it's nice to see a professional in action. Quite the view."

The tone should've been flattering. She knew he meant it to be, but mostly it made her tired. "Torian…" He perked up a little, eyes intent on her. She'd better hurry up and push words out. "I'm…not into Humans. Or, um, anyone."

"Oh," he said, holding to his easy graciousness as if she'd said nothing unusual, "got it." He turned to leave.

One thing she had to settle about this whole crazy arrangement. No matter how much she liked what it had been until ten seconds ago. "You want to leave, just say where. No hard feelings,
yeah?"

He half turned back, straightening up some while he did so. "I'm not going anywhere. You're still champion. It's enough for me."

Then, whether he meant it or not, he was gone.

*

November, 11 ATC

4 months after the confirmation of the Wrath

Quinn was gone, at Ruth’s command. Vette was gone, despite Ruth’s need. Broonmark stalked the halls of House Niral as if expecting an invasion. Jaesa was, over her own misgivings, seeing to Ruth’s interests in the Citadel. And Pierce…

“I’ll be fun, milord.”

Ruth settled her hands on her rounded belly and glared at the holo. “If I get shot in the stomach everybody’s going to have a bad day. Including you.”

“Fine,” he said affably. “Four more months?”

“Four more months. The Wrath will be back before you know it.” Involuntarily she looked over at the blank black-and-silver mask she had adopted since being confirmed Wrath. “Pierce, I’ll do everything in my power.”

“Let me handle it. The Republic will go on pissing themselves when they hear the Wrath’s forces are on the way.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Time of my life, milord.”

“Pierce…”

“Milord?”

Ruth sighed. She was tired, and aching, and almost out of friends. “Knock ‘em dead. I’ll be back before you know it.”

*

January, 14 ATC

The transport rattled fit to come apart. In fact, it mostly had. Tebbith’s concentration strained to hold the chassis together as the transport labored over the battlefield between plumes of flame.

Felix Iresso’s voice boomed in Tebbith’s ear. “Good, now get out of there!”

Tebbith raised a trembling hand to his mic. “Not without you!” This rescue mission had been a disaster from the start. Every tactical call Tebbith had made in command of this mission had somehow managed to make it worse. Now, outnumbered, outgunned, he didn’t even have the means of getting all his people out.
“You got the Senators. Go. I’ll manage things here.”

Tebbith stared through the open hatch to the nightmare battlefield below. The Republic troops had retreated in good order to the landing pad. But no more transports were coming. Behind Tebbith the Senators and their attendants clustered together away from the rattling walls. In front and below, the waves of the enemy were lapping further with each row of soldiers and droids.

It was the smoke making his eyes water. “We can land again. We can save you.”

“You’re already overloaded. They need you, Master Jedi. Let me do my job.”

“Master Jedi,” said the pilot, “if we’re going to leave before that shield comes back up, we need to go now.”

“Please. Felix.” For one broken moment he didn’t think about the numbers or the greater good or anything but what he could do if he were willing to let it all burn. “I can lift you if I get close enough, I–”

“It’s okay, Tebbith.” Two more seconds without resolution, two more seconds where he would have done anything given the slightest hint. “I understand. I think I always did. May the Force be with you.”

There is no death, Tebbith thought bitterly, and either coughed or retched into the smoke. “Take us up,” he rasped, and watched his integrity put up its brave final fight against an overwhelming force below.

*looks up from reading* Iresso doesn’t die to the screaming eels. But it puts a heckuva damper on his relationship.

*  

November, 13 ATC

Lana Beniko: Wanted for treason. It still hurt. Even knowing that there were powerful cultists responsible for her supposed fall from grace. Even knowing that she was going to find each and every one of them and purge them from the Imperial government – from anywhere they might try to hide.

For safety, the counter-conspirators had scattered. Larr Gith, Jedi wonder, had sparked away from Tython and was making herself conspicuous and happy in the Core worlds, drawing attention away from the real investigation. Darth Scythia had quashed the rumors about her with customary…flair. Theron Shan had melted as though he’d never been here, though Lana privately wondered whether the self-assured sneak realized just what an impression he made on the people who knew him. Jakarro and his droid had leaped into the Outer Rim underworld.

Lana was going to need more power than this to silence the Revanites for good. A figurehead would be ideal, someone a little more rational than Larr Gith to take up the charge, under Lana’s expert advice of course. But with a bounty on her head and a death mark on her name…what could she do, apart from survive?

She hated feeling helpless. Therefore, she wasn’t helpless. She opened the console and started searching for names. She would gather her allies again, and on that day, well. A lot of people would be getting a lot of truth directly applied to their faces. Soon, she prayed. Tomorrow might be
Wanted for treason. Her vindication when it came would be complete and final.

* 

January, 14 ATC

The boy was small. Nine, maybe. Darth Scythia smiled at him. “Did your father have to go away to work?”

“Yes. No. Yes.” The boy stuck out his chin manfully and tried to expand. “He’s not home.”

“Did he go away to avoid seeing me? I came with a reward, young man. I came to bring him credits. You haven’t had much of those recently, have you? It’s hard. Your father must be very worried.”

It wasn’t right, to see such concern in a child’s eyes. The boy spoke steadily, though. “We’ll be okay. That’s what he said.”

“And when my business with him is concluded, you’ll want for nothing. New clothes, a new speeder if you want. I promise I will give your family this. I just need to talk to him to give him what he’s due.”

The boy relented. “This way.” He grumbled about the beaten-up speeder they took, but he settled in front of Scythia and gave her directions through the jungle. All the way to a camouflaged little bunker.

“Come with me,” she said, and pulled the door open.

There was a short staircase down. Scythia took the boy’s hand, then removed the second door as easily. A knot of adult men turned to stare.

“Did you think,” Scythia said, “that you could conspire against a Sith?”

“Davey, come away,” barked the man in the center. Scythia tightened her grip. “Dear boy,” she cooed, and used her free hand to pull an elaborate golden ring from her pocket. “Good boy. Take this seal. When we are done here, go to the bank in Kaas City and tell them that Jora Mei has awarded you twenty thousand credits.” It was more than these peasants would otherwise see in five years. “Thank you for your assistance.”

Terrified though he was, the child didn’t flinch at the name. He didn’t know to. Ah, to be anonymous and innocent again.

Well, anonymous, anyway.

She kept his hand. “Traitors,” she said. “Traitors to the Empire and to your betters. I could have given you life. I could have given you protection.”

“The Sith don’t protect anyone but themselves. Let go of my son.” His mouth hung open between words. “Please. He’s an innocent.”

“I know. I am not unreasonable. And I made him a promise.” She turned and leaned a little to meet the boy eye to eye. “You’ve been a very good boy,” she cooed. “Now, close your eyes.”

He did, and she only needed one hand to summon the lightning that scoured the pathetic hideout
from ceiling to floor.

When the roaring had died down, and the boy looked, Scythia gripped his jaw and turned his head back toward her. “I spare your life today, my friend, and I pay you for your cooperation. Remember me. I may call on you again.”

“Why?” he whispered. It wasn’t immediately clear which part he was asking about.

Oh, he served in his time. In the end, the individuals didn’t matter. The policy, even and consistent, did. No one double-crossed Darth Scythia. The pile of corpses didn’t count.

**

Rylon got out of his room early. His clothes, blue pants and a dark orange shirt, were more or less in order, and his black hair, still short from when he’d cropped it to military length, stuck mostly up.

Mom waved greeting. She was in her usual greys. She had packed a small bag. “Where are you going?” he said.

“I’m not entirely sure. I’ll be finding out this morning.”

One question had floated up, actually a few times, and he realized he was going to have to ask it. “Mom?”

She set down the bag and really looked at him. “Yes?”

“Why won’t you talk to Father anymore?”

That look cut away. “Your father and I don't see eye to eye on everything. I want you to have him. He loves you. But I have nothing to say to him.”

“Mr. Wynston lets me call, but he hates him.”

“They don't see eye to eye, either. They made very different professional choices.”

“Was Mr. Wynston ever a soldier?”

“I’m really not sure.”

“Then how do you know what choices he made?”

“He ended up here.”

“So did Father.”

“By a very different route. It's not your fault. It's barely even his fault. I just don't have anything to say to him anymore, and having him here watching me day in and day out is only going to hurt both of us. Is there something wrong? Do I need to know something about today’s call?”


“I love you. I’ll holo you when I know how long I’ll be out.”

The route to classes in the bulky left flank of Odessen was considered safe enough for Rylon to navigate on his own. There were a solid thirty students in his classroom, spanning maybe three
years. Today Jedi Master Tebbith was giving an overview of Republic borders since the Treaty of Coruscant.

“The occupation governor of Balmorra in those years was Darth Lachris, a protégé of Darth Marr of the Dark Council. She came to power during an active rebellion and employed extreme measures to suppress that rebellion. Ultimately the Balmorran resistance succeeded in killing her and tearing down her power base.”

Rylon raised his hand. “Wasn’t that you?”

The big Zabrak looked like a gizka in headlights. “I beg your pardon?”

“Wasn’t it you who killed Darth Lachris and got the Empire off Balmorra.”

“I was…tangentially involved. President Tai Cordan and Zenith did the real work.”

“Isn’t that what got the whole Rift Alliance back into the Republic?” said someone else. Rylon probably ought to feel bad about Tebbith’s discomfort, but really, if you didn’t want to be that historical you shouldn’t step in history all the time.

After the morning’s classes and lunch with his classmates in the smaller cafeteria they had built next to school, Rylon headed over to the Force enclave where Sana-Rae and Ru-Baden were in charge.

“Guess what?” came a deep woman’s voice behind him.

“Huh?” he said, turning.

It’s your lucky day!” Jedi Master Larr Gith was wearing tight red clothes with oddly placed cutouts. “I am here to offer you all a lesson in battle.” She raised her voice and swept the busy studio with her big honey-colored eyes. It appeared that Rylon’s primary qualification had been being the person closest to the door when she walked in. “Listen up, kids, this could be you.”

“Master Gith, I’m not supposed to—”

“Nonsense, everybody wants to learn how to beat their enemies with lightsabers.” She waved and a practice blade swooped off the stand and presented itself to Rylon’s hand. He took it. Master Gith took one of her own. “Now. You’ve got one job. Hit me.”

He spent two seconds waiting after she struck a guarded pose. Then, realizing that nobody was going to get him out of this, he charged, blade stretched forward.

Master Gith sidestepped him and tapped his wrist with her blade. “Good, but you need it closer to your body if you want close-quarters control. That goes for slashing, too. The extra reach of a long extension incurs a serious penalty to control. But boy, when it looks good, it looks great.”

He tried again and again, and she deflected, dodged, and always had a flourishing counterattack. She worked with him to demonstrate some of the flashier moves two or three times.

She asked again. Rylon pulled his focus tightly around him, trying not to draw on his frustration. But the frustration was right there. He ran straight past her, and up the wall, spinning to direct his practice blade directly over her—

Something didn’t go right. His ankle turned against the wall and he fell to one side, landing hard on his arm.
Master Gith was on her knees beside him in an instant. “That was awesome,” she said. “Dumb, but creative. Look up at me. Look. Watch what I’m doing in the Force. This is the way to pull that off.” She stood, backed up a few steps, and took a running start at the wall. He felt the moment she started drawing on the Force to defeat gravity and send her kicking in an arc, blade down now, until she landed on one knee and swept her blade to the side. “Got that? Think you could do it if you tried again?”

Rylon nodded. His arm hurt a lot.

Master Tebbith cleared his throat. He looked a lot more cheerful than he had during the Balmorra discussion.

Master Gith seemed to notice it too. “You’ve been talking to Ko-oth,” she said. “I can tell from the hearts floating off you. Do I have to give you the talk about the birds and the Grees?”

Tebbith’s tattooed brown skin flushed darker. “I should hope not. We were discussing interplanetary policy.”

“Mm. Policy. How many times have I used that one?”

“Master Larr, please. There are children present.”

“And they will learn from the best.” She turned back to Rylon. “Learn to sound intelligent, kid, it’ll open doors and other things all your life. Repeat after me:” and she cleared her throat. “Liberation of a planet is meaningless unless you provide a presence to liberate the people.”

“Ow,” Rylon said, as politely as he could.

Master Tebbith looked dismayed. “Niral, you’re wounded.” He rushed past Master Gith and knelt. “Here. May I take your arm?” Rylon surrendered his forearm and Tebbith took it in large gentle painful hands. “Watch while I do this. It may be a discipline you’re interested in.”

Rylon watched in the Force. Most of Tebbith’s effort appeared to be examination. Then, after a lot of thinking about it, the Force itself started to drip and knit around the damaged bone. Rylon followed along in spite of himself, testing the feel with a Force awareness of his own. He tried applying the same soothing to the bruise that he felt thickening in his flesh.

Master Tebbith looked pleased. “You’re a quick study, my friend. Good as new.”

“Master Larr.” Rylon scrambled to his feet and backed up, still instinctively cradling his arm. Lord Beniko was standing in the doorway, bulky in armor and cape. She looked at his arm. She touched her silver artificial hand with her flesh one. She gave him a coldly courteous nod. Then she returned to Master Gith. “If you would?”

“That’s the show, folks,” she said to what audience remained. “Later!” The two blonde Humans left.

Rylon’s holo beeped. “Oh,” he said. “That’s my alarm. Thank you, Master Tebbith.” He bowed. Then he ran back to his quarters.

Vette was already there. “Hello there. I thought you were going to be late.”

A hollow formed in Rylon’s stomach. “No,” he said. He wouldn’t give up a moment.

“All right, let’s get this started.”
Father was there when the big holo in the room came up. He was always there. Tall, in uniform, looking awfully serious.

“Hi,” said Rylon.

“Hello,” said Father. “I trust you’re well?”

“I broke my arm a few minutes ago.”

“How?” He said it like preparing to take aim with the blaster he had at his side.

“I tried to run around Master Gith, uh, vertically, and it didn’t work.”

“An intriguing tactic if you can perfect it. I assume you received immediate medical attention.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Um, how’re things with you?”

“Not nearly so exciting.”

Father spent his time following the Imperial military on board the *Revocation*. They didn’t have a lot to update from four days ago, but they found things, anything to not make the hour end early. School, anecdotes of history, a halting attempt to explain a Force technique. Vette sat in the background staring at a holopad; she gave no commentary whatsoever.

Until somebody pounded on the door.

Vette looked up. She looked at Father and Rylon. “Hold that thought,” she said, and bounced up to answer.

The tall Human Rylon had seen with Vette before stood in the doorway, her long red jacket trailing behind. “Vette, code red, Calline’s got a lead on a job that pays like crazy, we just need a fast ship with a great pilot. That’s us.”

“Kinda busy,” said Vette.

Risha frowned at Rylon, then at Father. “Hello, handsome. What’s he going to do, reach out through the holo and steal him?”

Rylon saw where this was going. “Please don’t make me hang up.”

“Big job. And Akaavi’s about to take the ship without you.”

“If I cut this call early the Outlander’s going to…well, something creatively nasty.” The Twi’lek looked panicked. “Wait. I’ve got this. I sprint for five minutes. I call you two back from my ship. We finish. Rylon, if anybody asks, I did watch you at start time and stop time.” Rylon nodded anxiously. “Quinn, no kidnapping. Or sedition. Or treason. Or—”

“Vette.”

“Ah, nobody says my name like you do. Bye, boys.” She ran for the door, Risha leading the way.

Rylon turned back to his father. It was his first unsupervised time with him since before his first excursion off Odessen. His mind raced. “Father?” he said.

“Yes, Rylon?”
“Whycan'tyouworkhere?”

He swallowed. “It isn't up to me. My particular skills are needed where I am. And your mother and I have…differences.”

“What was different?”

“That's not for me to say.”

“Mom won’t talk.”

Father nodded as though that explained something. “She has her reasons.”

“Is it about the Lord on the Revocation? Is it what I did?”

“Far from it,” Father said hurriedly. “That made it clear that I cannot keep you with me in the Empire, but I want you to understand that, whatever happened between your mother and me, it was nothing to do with you. Not your fault, not your doing. We separated before we knew about you, and that was...correct. I may regret what happened, most of all because it means I cannot join you at h-your side. But she has her reasons. We must defer to that.”

Circles, always circles. “How come she gets to make all the decisions?”

“Rylon. A long, long time ago, I was assigned to serve a Sith. That is the way of the Empire. It was my honor. She made me her advisor, her husband, but she could never make me her equal. That probably sounds strange to you. She is teaching you…humility. That is...her prerogative. Maybe your close relationships will be unrelated to your power. But in her life the decisions are hers, and always will be.”

“She doesn't hate you. She could...I don't know.”

“Hatred is no longer relevant. Respect her wishes, my son. She's the one who can keep you safe. She is the fiercest guardian in the galaxy. I should know. And I would sacrifice a great deal more than one desirable job to know that you are protected.”

The holo clicked. Father’s image moved to one side to show Vette. Father immediately straightened his already tight pose. “Otherwise, how are your studies? Have you had enough of reading history?”

The switch was too abrupt. He was talking about something other than what he was talking about. “It's hard to understand.”

“You will. You'll have the rest of it to read in the proper time.”

They closed out the call. Rylon got ready for dinner. Some days they actually used the kitchen, but more often he went to the big cafeteria where the rank and file dined.

Rylon started walking before his supervisor got there. It was a well-mapped scheme: Master Gith and Master Tebbith's statements were strong recommendations. Sana-Rae and Vette had Mom's ear, and so had better be obeyed. Mr. Wynston had oddly never issued an order, but Mom took him very, very seriously. Theron was practically Mom's voice while she was away. Father seemed to have no authority, but Mom had made it extremely clear to everyone in this web that the calls were not to be missed or interrupted.

Sana-Rae came on him in the hallways. He was never really sure how well she could track him
with her brain. “Master,” he said, nodding.

“Rylon. How is your arm?”

“Master Tebbith did a good job,” said Rylon. “Could he have made it stronger if he wanted to?”

“That is outside my area of expertise,” the Voss said calmly. “Come. Let us eat. Bold action may take you far, Rylon. Quiet watching and waiting may also move things that you might not think are movable. You must learn both to fully develop in the Force.”

Rylon took the bold action part for his meal. “So did Vette call you to get me?”

“Yes. I understand she had to leave.”

“Yeah. She said I could get extra dessert.”

“And what does your mother say?”

“Vette said Mom said I could get extra dessert.” He judged his chances. “I broke my arm.”

“I saw that. You were very brave. Perhaps Master Gith can show you how to work your way up to that maneuver. Go on, get your dessert.”

Afterward she walked him back to his quarters. Theron was just arriving when they got there. “Takes a village,” he said cheerfully. “Thanks, Sana-Rae.”

“If you ignore the past, you jeopardize your future,” said Rylon. Just another drop of Jedi wisdom he’d had on Tython.

“A secret shared is a trust formed,” said Theron, drawing from his own training. Theron followed Rylon inside.

“Where's Mom?”

“She went to an Imp party. She’s going to dazzle and Wynston's going to infiltrate.”

“You can infiltrate.”

“Not as an alien, I can’t. And not as a man walking around with a small fortune attached to his face. It's complicated.”

“Where is she? Is it dangerous?”

“Can't say, and not very. They’re getting information, no reason for the sabers to come out. I love it when your mother gets to not do that. Proves something to everyone.”

“I talked to Father today.”

“That go okay?”

“Why won't Mom let him stay?”

Theron’s good mood evaporated. “A few reasons,” he said. “He doesn't belong here. This is your mother's show. She built it after—no. What happened, it's your mother's story. I don't mess with that.”
“And her story is why he can't stay?”

“Sometimes when something’s over it's over forever. Sometimes, because of decisions that were made, you can't get it back. If she doesn't want to see him we can't fix that.” Rylon didn’t know what the look on his own face was, but Theron didn’t seem to like it. “I'm biased, chief. Ask her for the whole story if you want it. But if she's not ready to talk that through yet, give her some space. She's not holding your father at arm's length just to be difficult.”

“He wants to be here.”

There was a pause Rylon couldn’t interpret. “I know. But this isn't the right place for him. Couple more days, chief, you'll get the next call.”

And that was all he was going to get. Until Mom decided to explain. Quiet watching and waiting, maybe. “I broke my arm today.”

“You what?”

The day quietly lowered towards its close.
The Story So Far; Voss

Chapter Summary

The plot to date is summarized. Ruth hears about an unusual opportunity on Voss, and deals with it as best she can. Wynston looks up an old contact. (Ruth, Valkorion, Larr Gith, Lana, Scythia, Arcann, Senya, Tebbith, Wynston, Yana-Ton)

Spoilers throughout Knights of the Fallen Empire/KotFE.

The regular narrative resumes at the end of this recap.

Knights of the Fallen Empire has come and gone. The Alliance on Odessen comprises RUTH NIRAL, the Outlander, formerly the Emperor’s Wrath; Ruth’s young son RYLON, whose father serves in the Imperial military; WYNSTON, a Chiss formerly of Imperial Intelligence, now Ruth’s right hand; CALLINE, his sister, an independent contractor; LARR GITH, the fabulous Hero of Tython, destroyer of the Revanite cult, and all-around savior; TEBBITH, Jedi Barsen’thor and reclusive scholar; VETTE, a smuggler with history; also, of course, THERON SHAN, KOTH VORTENA, and LANA BENIKO, bound by love, patriotism, and common cause.

The slightest distortion will unbalance the Alliance’s efforts. Zakuulian ally SENYA TIRALL has abducted her son, the murderous EMPEROR ARCANN, in the hopes of finding healing for him. In his absence EMPRESS VAYLIN has seized the Eternal Throne with AI SCORPIO at her side. She lashes destruction across the galaxy, opposed by the Alliance and the contractual cooperation of DARTH SCYTHIA of the Dark Council. Scythia awaits the proper time to exact the final element of her price: one kill of her choice by Ruth’s hand.

And EMPEROR VALKORION’s presence persists in Ruth’s mind, though she knows better than to submit to him like she did repeatedly on Zakuul…

All future chapters contain spoilers for Knights of the Eternal Throne through Chapter 9: The Eternal Throne.

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“The Eternal Fleet is converging again,” said Lana over the holo.

Ruth ran to ops.

Odessen kept an off-kilter schedule but for some events everyone woke up, even the ones Ruth was usually on an opposite timescale with. The main figures of the Alliance gathered around. Lana pointed at the huge planet on the projector. Its moon had unmistakable rings. “They’ve come to Voss. It’s anyone’s guess why. Our ships aren’t in an immediate position to intervene.”

Wynston was all business. “Can we bring Scythia’s ships to bear in time?”

“She’s not answering. We need to stop the bombardment and do what we can for damage control on the surface.”

Ruth pushed the memories away and nodded. “Lana, Theron, with me. Tebbith, if these locals need
help, you seem like a logical choice.” That city was a mountain of history. Tebbith didn’t like going into the field but surely he had to respond to that.

To her shock, the Zabrak nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“Fine. Now, as for the Fleet. Is Koth ready?”

“He’s willing,” said Lana.

“Let’s take Torian’s people for the ground phase.” The Mandalorians had been restless lately. Here they could find the employment Lana had promised.

Wynston looked at her. “I’d like to come with you. If Voss-Ka is in danger there’s some business I need to attend to.”

She only vaguely remembered Wynston’s contacts on the ground on Voss. He had seemed to like them. “You, too?” she said.

“I owe a debt.”

“I understand.” Her benefactor on Voss had given her the last truth in dark and treacherous days. He’d been a spirit, a vision. No one she could help, though she owed him for what help he had been. She could at least protect his planet.

Theron stepped in. “Wynston, not to be a hard case, but are you making house calls in the middle of a Vaylin offensive?”

“I’ll make it quick. Believe me, I can deal with her shock troopers.”

The thing was, he could. How many battlegrounds had he survived, through luck, skill, or bloody-mindedness? Many. And how many times had he asked for personal favors? Few. Ruth nodded. “Fine. Theron, watch here, make sure there’s no phase 2 to what they’re doing? I need your hooks in the information flow here. Step in if the Fleet tries anything novel.”

“Protecting me?”

“Protecting Odessen. We’ll fight side by side again.”

“I…” He looked at the planet. He looked at her. “Don’t dawdle out there, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“Ahem,” said Larr Gith.

“What?” said Ruth.

“Which world am I saving today?”

She fit into no intelligent plan. “You know what? Stay here with Theron. Take shifts if you need to. Make certain that absolutely nothing happens.”

Larr Gith nodded sharply. “The bards are going to sing about how boring this place was.”

The Alliance was in possession of a small fleet, growing every month or so and sometimes getting infusions from allies. Ruth went ahead in the fastest cruiser they had. The destination was Voss. Voss, the golden land of her marriage. Voss, the golden burn of her illusions. Voss, the first face of
the one who would be her master. Voss, the last word from friends for a long time.

It was a sparsely populated planet. Only one city to speak of, nestled in the mountains beneath the hanging moon. She could barely see the flames through the ranks of Eternal Fleet vessels in orbit. Dropships were streaming out of hangars to carry troops to the land below. How many were just getting blown up by the orbital strikes, she couldn’t tell. Maybe Vaylin didn’t care.

Their shuttle nosed onto the edge of Voss-Ka’s plateau. Ruth and Torian were the first on the ground.

“Ruth,” said Lana, just behind her.

“Yes?”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

Ruth looked up at the shadows in the sky. “No. You?”

“I was wondering whether you’d had more Force inspiration.”

“Not really, no.”

Tebbith cleared his throat. “Look, it seems like many people are in trouble here. I’m going to the Tower of Justice to see whether their authorities have a preference for my aid.”

“Go ahead,” said Ruth. She looked around. Wynston was already gone. “We’ll gather back here in a few hours.”

The conversation stopped like a bell struck once and left to ring. The flames around them greyed out and the chaos stilled. Given the scenery, for the first time Ruth was a little grateful to have something else to look at.

“Voss burns,” said Valkorion. “Your friends suffer.”

“Enjoying it?”

“Such chaos demands my attention. In my absence you completed your training and dethroned my son. But you also allowed my daughter to seize power. Now witness the destructive might of the Eternal Throne.”

“You sound proud.”

“It does not require my pride to be one of the great feats of the galaxy. If Vaylin remains on the throne, Voss is only a taste of the carnage to come.”

“You should know. Nothing she’s done holds up to Ziost.”

“My child is more powerful than you can imagine. Soon you will see.” He looked thoughtfully off at a wall of flame that had frozen in its sweep. “Soon.”

The world released. The warmth came back and with it the lashes of heat. Ruth looked around. There were some Zakuulian droids nearby. She nodded at Lana and leaped in.

Only to be interrupted by her holo. She slashed down the nearest droid and looked at it. “Distress call,” she said. “Who here has the codes for…?” Lana was watching. Ruth stumbled and stopped. “It’s Senya.”
Ruth checked that Torian was not having trouble with the droids. Then she answered.

“Ruth,” said Senya. “I didn’t expect to find you so close.”

“So close to what?”

“The Shrine of Healing. Arcann is with me here.”

Lana nodded. “Of course. Vaylin’s attacking to burn her family out of hiding.”

“And now she leaves me no choice. I need your help. Arcann needs your help.” Ruth’s tongue lay in knots. Senya pressed on. “I don’t know whether my son deserves a second chance. But I know you will understand when I say I will fight with everything I have to gain one for him.”

“Senya, do you really believe you can change his mind?” Ruth had waded in that sea herself. Escaping it was the work of years. And it had only been that easy because she had wanted to change.

“Have you seen the miracles of the Shrine of Healing? I brought him here to mend his broken body, cure him of his hatred. Then Vaylin found us. We don’t have much time. Help me hold off my daughter’s army. Once Arcann is healed, he’ll join your fight. I know it.”

“Or we stand aside,” Lana said crisply. “And let Vaylin eliminate two of the galaxy’s most dangerous fugitives.”

Senya turned her eyes back to Ruth. They were pale and desperate.

Senya had taken Arcann and fled before Ruth had recovered her son Rylon. They had been mothers in the same room once, but mothers lost in grief. Maybe that could change now. Stranger things had happened. “Just tell me where to go.”

Ruth had entered the Shrine of Healing once, a long time ago. She had sought glimpses of the future alongside Wynston and Vector, while Quinn stood guard. It was her third to last day of trusting him. Today she had no time for Voss rituals. Except for one. Could a ritual save a soul? Who was she to say it couldn’t?

She was trying hard to convince herself. She had been friends with Senya in grief. If anyone deserved to have a little joy paid back, it was her.

The shuttle ride was brief; Ruth remembered the way, and it was short. The Mandalorians fanned out around the majestic structure, joining an improbable alliance between Voss commandos and Gormak warriors in defending the gate. They let Ruth and Lana through.

Ruth raced between walls of intricate dark carvings. Seven Voss were kneeling in a circle in the cavernous opening chamber, their robes bright against the dark brown stone.

One looked up. “You have come. Your warrior awaits beyond the third door.” She returned to her meditation.

Well, Voss were allies, and Ruth had never known one to lie. She kept running.

Finally she turned a corner where Senya waited with blue blade out. She looked past Ruth and Lana as if to verify no further troops were coming. “Walk with me,” said Senya. “It’s not much further.”
The room was vast, as all rooms in the Shrine were. Arcann lay on a wide bed with Voss gathered around him. Kneeling, as the ones in the front hall had been. Utterly intent. The feeling of the room fizzed in Ruth like swarms of bubbles rushing together toward the bed into a solid shape she could not yet predict.

“Can this really make a difference?” murmured Ruth.

“They have convinced me,” said Senya. “It won’t be long now.” The room shuddered. “It won’t be long,” she repeated tightly.

The holo beeped.

“Not a good time,” muttered Lana.

It beeped again, urgently.

“Cover me,” said Ruth, and pulled it out, only to find the little blue image of Darth Scythia.

“Lord Niral,” she said expansively. “You’re not on Voss by any chance, are you?”

“Let’s assume,” grated Ruth, “that I know your informants. Yes. I’m on Voss.”

“Very well. I have come to name the person I want you to remove as per our arrangement. You know, the one where you promised me a death of my choosing.”

“In exchange for aid you didn’t offer for this operation?”

“You got your support over the past months. Don’t get petty now. Now, as for the target.”

“Who is it?”

Scythia developed a coy pout. “Emperor Arcann.”

Ruth looked up at Senya. Senya looked back at Ruth, cold but brittle.

“Now,” said Scythia, “I am an honorable woman, but in case you are thinking of not returning that…well. I have a small task force on their way to your happy home, and I believe your fleet is tied up out of reach. If Arcann isn’t dead in the next twelve hours your Odessen will be reduced to slag.”

“Scythia.”

“Keep your end of the deal and Odessen is safe. That’s all there is to it.” Scythia smiled acidly. “I look forward to your report.”

“He’s not a threat! He’s changed!” Saying it she could almost believe it. She hoped. A mother’s evaluation was skewed but Ruth had seen enough to know that a mother could be right.

“He’s dying,” said Scythia. “I have nothing further to add except plenty of orbital bombardment. I leave that decision in your hands.” She winked out.

Ruth stashed her holo with one hand and drew a lightsaber with the other. “She’s serious,” she said.

“Don’t do this,” said Senya. “You must have a way of stopping Scythia’s fleet.”

“I did, until we moved it all here to stop Vaylin!” Ruth activated her other saber. Lana behind her
activated hers. “Senya, I’m sorry. I didn’t come here to do this. But I can’t weigh him against Odessen. You must understand that.” She stepped forward.

Senya blocked, the motion elegant and decisive. Ruth tested again, and again, and thrust. Senya dodged without moving out of place. “You will not take him.”

“I have to. Please, don’t make me stop you, too.”

“You can find another way. You always find another way. We have twelve hours.”

“To stop a woman forty-eight hours away!”

Senya thrust, twice, three times, then parried Ruth’s swing and shifted. “Lie to her. Stall her.”

Ruth pressed a rapid attack. “She’s not stupid. She has spies on this planet, possibly in this room.”

Senya shifted, counterattacked, returned to a blocking guard. “Why are you afraid of this woman?”

“Because in the twelve years I’ve known her, in the twelve years the Empire has known her, she has never once failed to follow through on her word! And her word is that everyone I love will die if I don’t pay my debts. I’m sorry that he’s the only thing precious enough.”

“I see.” Senya swung. “You will not take him.”

“Lana,” said Ruth. “Please.”

Senya circled them both. “Would you do less for your child?”

“Senya, hundreds of people are going to die if he goes free.” All three rushed together. Ruth paused beneath the sound of blades shrieking at one another. “Even if he’s cured.”

“You can find another way to save them. I promise, if I strike you down, I will find that other way. I will not abandon the Alliance, but I will not buy their lives with Arcann’s blood.”

“I can’t fight Scythia and you! Senya, Arcann ravaged planets! He took five years of my life, left my family defenseless, and blamed me when I started getting it back! Any trial in the galaxy would find him guilty of this and more!”

The reasoning fell away leaving naked emotion. “He is the only son I have left!”

The tear spilled onto Ruth’s cheek in a hot shock. “And only his death can save my son,” she said. “Let me pass.”

“Over my dead body. This is what I have of my family. And if you continue…well. If I can’t save my son, at least I can kill his father.” The strain on her face eased, replaced by a heavy-browed intentness.

Ruth defended herself. She wasn’t here to maim Senya. She wasn’t here to kill her. But a lightsaber left few other outcomes possible. Ruth lashed out with the Force, seeking to stun, to disorient. Senya deflected her effort with a hand and a shrug of her deep center.

“Lana?” said Ruth.

“Trying,” said Lana.

Senya was a well of power. They locked and fell back, circled and struck. Slowly Ruth and Lana
beat Senya back toward the bed.

Then there was a sharp clear tone, and Arcann lurched up to sit. Ruth noted that his arm had not been replaced. The mask that covered most of his face was just as Ruth remembered. His eye was glowing orange.

He looked at the three of them and snarled. Then he stood and started running toward a door in the far wall.

“Lana,” snapped Ruth. “Go.”

“She’ll kill you if you keep playing.”

“Save Theron. Save my son. Stop him, Lana.”

Senya swung. Ruth hurled herself away and rolled. She could afford no more distractions.

Senya turned to follow Lana. Ruth stashed one of her sabers and reached to grab Senya’s shoulder and whirl her around. “I can’t let you,” she said.

Senya swung. Ruth blocked. Senya reached with her free hand and Ruth felt too late the grip on her throat, lifting, squeezing, turning the air from clear to spotted grey.

“I learned this from you,” she said. “Among many, more pleasant lessons. I’m sorry.”

Out of tricks. Ruth stabbed through Senya’s shoulder. The pressure eased – for an instant. Senya’s wounded arm fell. Her other hand dropped the saber and took up the squeeze. Ruth gagged and stabbed again…this time at her opponent’s chest.

Senya’s mouth opened in a little “o”. She fell to the floor. So did Ruth. Ruth twisted and scrambled to turn Senya on her back and somewhat compose her limbs. A lightsaber usually cauterized wounds, but a fully ruptured artery could bleed. A lot. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I am so sorry.”

Senya looked through her. “I know he’s there. Can I…talk to him?”

“There’s no time.”

“Yes, there is.” The voice came with footsteps at the back of her mind. The world blurred a little, becoming sharper only in the most distant corners. Time slowed, but the alarm in Ruth’s chest built more with every second. Valkorion’s figure stepped forth.

“The mother of my children,” he said coolly. “Reduced to ruin by a parent’s folly.”

“Valkorion,” said Senya.

“Senya.” Was that a shot of something emotional? “‘This kiss of Izax warms you…”’

She sang, and her voice only bubbled a little. “‘…and lights your eternal flame.’”

“You remembered.”

“I never forgot. How you sang to me on Aivala’s Crest.” Her mouth turned down. “How you turned your back on your children. How you made them kill your enemies. Kill each other, all for a taste of approval that would never come. Why?”

“You know why.”
It seemed to be the end of Valkorion’s attention span. He stepped back and the world returned, and Ruth shook her head, feeling the vague stickiness of having someone else’s conversation in her head. Senya lay still. Blood was pooling behind one shoulder.

“It’s not too late,” said Ruth. “Let us take you. We can….”

She shook your head. “No. I can’t.” Blood bubbled up with the words. “Did we both lose this battle?”

“Senya. My friend. Rest.”

“What is it…Theron always said? There’s time…to rest when I’m dead.” She smiled. “Very soon now. Forgive me…forgive me if I hope that my son escaped.”

No more time. Ruth ran. All the same, she felt the moment of release behind her, the last stilling of a prodigious will.

The back door led down a high hallway to a little gate that led out into an inferno. Ruth ran up beside Lana. A troop transport was rising from a pile of wreckage. In the foreground Lana was struggling under a fallen pillar, fighting her own lightsaber. Her silver hand looked tarnished through all the ash.

Ruth rushed up. Lana seemed to be intact, but she was struggling to cut her pinned cape off. Ruth took care of it and waited for some word of hope. Any one would do.

“I’m sorry,” said Lana. “He got away.”

“No,” said Ruth, less because it was false and more because her brain couldn’t fit larger words just then. “No. – Oh, Force. Theron.” She fumbled out her holo.

“Senya?” said Lana.

“Dead,” said Ruth. “Pick up, pick up…”

He did. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said briskly. “What’s the word?”

“Theron, evacuate Odessen. Get as many people into space as you can, somewhere far away. Everyone else, get them out of the complex, spread out, as far from civilization as you can. Hurry. Don’t be a hero, just get them out. Get Rylon out.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down. What happened?”

“I failed. Get our people out, Theron. Get our son out. I’ll return, and when I do the bombardment will stop.” Somehow.

“Is this the Eternal Fleet? Was Voss a fakeout? I can…”

“It’s Scythia. There’s no more time. Go. Please. I’m sorry I can’t give you more than that. Force free you, my heart. Force speed your way.”

“Ruth.”

“What?”

His smile was sweet but his eyes were worried. “We’ll laugh about all this confusion when we get together.”
“Shh. Run.”

The soot was heavy in the hot wind as Theron disappeared and Ruth sank, wobbling, to her knees. “I failed,” she said. “My entire job is killing things and I failed the one time it mattered and everyone I care about is going to pay.” Her tear was hot, too, one and then another. “Stars, Lana, I killed her for loving her son. That was her only offense.”

Lana set a hand on her shoulder. “We have one more battle to deal with. Let’s get back to the transport.”

*

The teahouse was still standing. Wynston took a sharp breath, in and out, stabilizing. He could use a drink. Tea would do.

Inside looked just the same. Wynston had kept no particular aesthetic memory of the place but it had the same sorts of wall hangings, all narrow enough to make poor hiding places for threats, and the tables were still staggered in what he suspected was a traditional pattern. He sat down and nodded at a passing Voss. The Voss laid down his tray at another table and started distributing cups. In time he came back.

“Outsider,” he said. Wynston had never figured out how the expression of Voss voices worked. He might be anything from bored to murderous. “The skies burn.”

“A matter I intend to change.” The Voss’s expression changed fractionally. “Please. We should start anew as the spring.” He pitched it to carry. The waiter bowed and left. Wynston watched the door to the back.

And forty seconds later she was there, tall, willowy, patterned and blue-eyed. Wynston stood as she approached. “Yana-Ton.”

“Husband,” she said, calmly, beautifully. She dismissed the server with a wave. “At the end of the world you return.”

“You told me you no longer served the tea-house, but I didn’t know where else to look.”

“I was never far.”

“I came as soon as I heard,” he said.

“Why did this happen? The Mystics foresaw that if we took no side we would not be endangered.”

“That prophecy…” Was a lie. It had been invented by Wynston’s nemesis to keep Voss paralyzed while greater plans moved the galaxy. That prophecy, part of the corpus that defined Voss life, had been a falsehood, a violation of everything they held dear. “It didn’t say forever, did it?” he said weakly.

She pointed upward. “Were these the people you fought when you came to us last?”

“No. The people I came here for last time…I stopped them. Since you helped me they lost their ability to kill. I took what was theirs to use in other battles. Like this one.”

“It was…useful, then.”

“Much more than I ever had the chance to tell you. You did save millions of lives. More than you
or I will ever meet.” That was too distant, too theoretical. “When I fought those old battles, I did it for spite, I did it for passion, I did it for a grudge. You showed me how to do something for duty. I never forgot.”

“You did your duty. I never forgot.”

Wynston nodded, quietly ready for her next thought. When it didn’t come, he spoke. “Yana-Ton, how is it, being married without me?”

“I am still wed,” she said softly. “I attend the festivals, alone, as other spouses do when their partners are distant. My voice is heard at the meets. I receive the flowers in the spring and the crowns in the autumn.”

“But alone.”

“But alone.”

“Have you ever…found someone else?”

“Impossible. My bond is with you, and will be forever.”

“That bond. Because of the Rite of Ardor.” If he had controlled himself for two minutes…”If we had not done that, would it be different for you?”

“Then I would not have known that,” she whispered. “Ever. I…would have less to sustain me.”

But she understood the calculus of separation after these years apart. Their marriage had been a sham, paperwork legerdemain to get access to what he needed for his offworld mission. Now he wanted a clean cut and that required a certain sharpness. “This battle will be over soon. I don’t expect I’ll ever come back. Isn’t there any way you can free yourself from me?”

“Not until your death.”

“I can arrange that.”

Her lip curled convulsively. “Deceit, husband?”

“For you? Yes. You deserve that life.”

“You do not understand.”

“I know what loneliness is. I know what it is to realize that whoever it is who can help you, they’re a galaxy away and nothing you can say will reach them.”

“And did you come back to not be lonely?”

Nothing so charming. “I wanted to see you safe.”

The room shook.

“You see I am not,” she said coolly. “Can you stop the bombardment?”

“My friends are working on it. I should join them.”

“Oh.” She nodded thoughtfully. When her voice came back it was deeper, more modulated with the strange aural brush of a Voss voice. “You should not have come.”
There was a light in her eyes, and it was banked low. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Nevertheless,” she said, “my uncle’s household is at your disposal while you remain.”

“Yana-Ton, I don’t want to take anything from you. Survive. Make tea. Make art.” Some maneuvers were habitual. The look to her lips, so strangely carved, and back to her eyes, a little closer. “Stay in my dreams, if you want. No matter how far I stray.”

“Am I to choose whether you forget me?”

A tiny bit closer. “Choose whether I try.”

She stared into his eyes and he wondered whether his were as opaque to her as hers were to him. “Remember, husband,” she said softly. “As I will.” She tilted her head toward the cup on the table. “Finish your tea. Then join your allies.”

“Yana-Ton, I never thanked you. I don’t think I ever can.”

“Husband. There is no need. Be well.”

She walked away as though in a dance he had never learned the steps for. Outside the geometric cleanness of the teahouse, the city shuddered and raged.
Twelve Hours

Chapter Summary

The Alliance works on leaving Voss and evacuating Odessen while Scythia’s fleet moves to bombard the planet. (Tebbith, the Voss Three, Torian, Ruth, Rylon, Theron, Scythia, Khem Val, Wynston, Koth, Vette, Jorgan, Calline, Pierce, Lana, Larr Gith)

00:00: Tebbith

Ash flowed in the wind through the curving streets of Voss-Ka. Tebbith checked burning buildings on the way, straining to sense life, sending those he found to the caverns below the city.

The laser fire had stopped.

Embers drifted as though no one had told them they were solid matter. Hot wind raked the ground and spun around corners without warning. Tebbith hastened toward the unbroken tower.

The guards seemed to recognize him, though he didn’t have time to find out how. “Friends,” he said. “I respectfully request an audience with the Three. It regards defense against—” he pointed at the flaming city behind him – “this.”

“Be welcome,” said a cold Voss voice from the top of the stairs. There a robed woman beckoned. Tebbith hurried up.

“I am Jedi Master Tebbith,” he said. “Whom do I have the honor of addressing?”

“Yes,” she said calmly, bringing him up to a small chamber. Two male Voss stood on podiums there. The woman took up her place on a third.

“Your war brought this,” said the man on the left. “Voss-Ka burns because of your conflict.”

“We came to stop that conflict. What can I do to assure you of my good will?”

“We know your good will. It was foretold. As it is foretold that you will abandon us.”

“Surely not this day.” His holo beeped. He suppressed it without looking. “Tell me how I can help.”

“What skills do you bring us?” said the man on the right.

“I can lift, dig, open doors and close them. Shield people against harm. Suppress fires if they are small and avoid them if they are large. Memorize writings and figures to be recaptured later. Soothe children, heal the injured, console the sick, gentle the angry, and comfort the dying.” He shrugged. “Just little things, really.”

The woman nodded. “Go. Direct our people to the caves. Tend to the sick and the injured.”

“Won’t you come to safety?”
The woman shook her head. “This is not the day I die.”

“This is not the day I die,” said the man on the left.

“I have not seen,” said the man on the right. “But I am of the Three, and my duty is here.”

“I understand.” Tebbith bowed. “May the Force be with you.”

The woman looked blankly down on him. “Why?”

01:00: Torian

Torian’s men lifted off in the dropship with the command staff.

Something in the air had changed, and it wasn’t just the temperature. “Ma’am?” he said to the brunette Sith who had called his people’s movements for the last year and a half. “Why are we pulling out?”

Ruth Niral was a storm to look at, and she shook violently with the ship. “Scythia is attacking Odessen,” she said. “Be ready to carry out a boarding action.”

He grinned. “Yes, ma'am.” She didn’t even begin to return his enthusiasm. He was accustomed to her seriousness in the leadup to a military action, but this was even more bleak than usual. He wondered how someone became such a high-ranking warrior while disliking war.

He joined his people in the main compartment and filled them in. “That means no medical facilities where we’re going. Better walk it off on the way.” Laughter told him he could still count on them. “Jurkadir adenn!”

That’s when he heard it. Shouting behind him where the commanders were closed up. Torian’s mental calculations kicked into overdrive. A schism now could destroy the entire Alliance. They had to know that.

What did that mean for him? As for leadership, the Outlander had the best claim by strength, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Lana and Wynston were cunning warriors, credits to the cause. More importantly, the Champion might side with her brother. And where she went, Torian went. That was just a fact.

02:00: Rylon

“All right, people, walk, hang tight to your kids. There is no time to return to your quarters. Head out to the landing pads, Aygo will take care of you. Keep moving.”

Rylon stayed close at Theron’s side. The man reached out to touch his head every few seconds to make sure he was still there.
Theron was terrified, and Rylon wasn't a strong enough Sith to take charge. He kept his chin up and his eyes open. Maybe no one was watching to be proud, but if they were, he would live up to it.

Odessen had been kicked hard. People were tumbling through the hallways, mostly in the same direction, while Theron walked along knocking on doors. Theron had always seemed gentle next to, say, Mom or Father. But he was not taking nonsense today.

Rylon hated to be a bother, but he had to know. “Why are we running away?”

Theron’s mouth thinned. “People who don't like us very much decided we're not their friends. Stick with me, chief. We're going to be fine.”

“Do we have to fight?”

“No,” he said loudly. “No, you don't.” He pounded on a door and scowled, pulling his cybernetics down with him. “The entire point of having you here was to keep you away from fighting,” he muttered.

“Is my father fighting?”

“No with us. All right, people, keep it moving. General Aygo will get you settled on ships and we’ll be out of here before you know it. Just keep walking.”

He was holding his holo with his free hand. Two fingers kept wobbling out as if to start a call, and stopping. Rylon took out his holo. “I can call her.”

“Oh, chief. She’s busy. You just stick with me.”

03:00: Scythia

The offices of Darth Scythia took up two floors in one of the tallest towers around the Citadel. She had had to kill several important people to get that.

She looked out the window. Behind her servants were dismantling the office. Speed mattered above all now. If Ruth Niral had killed Virinos Geth for testing her son’s defenses…well, then Scythia had just declared all-out war. The things it took to keep people honest these days...

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Scythia said darkly.

The massive creature behind her didn’t editorialize. <Mistress?>

“The Wrath failed. I wasn’t expecting that at all.” She sighed. “Everything’s in place for the next step but it shouldn’t have been necessary. Now I have to kill everyone she values. It was that Emperor’s trollop, I’m sure of it. No one else have talked her into protecting that parasite. All that effort to find him…and the assassin was already in the neighborhood…brought to naught. Never rely on Sith.”

<Except you.>

“Mm. Find Wretch. I expect his people to tell me what that Voss ritual did and where Arcann ended up and I expect that information quickly. I am extremely reliable, Khem. Like it or not.” She
eyed the lightning as she would a potential minion. “Most people don’t.”

04:00: Wynston

Ruth, Lana, and Wynston gathered in the room off the bridge.

“What happened?” said Wynston.

“She made a deal with Scythia,” said Ruth. “You! Made a deal! With Scythia!”

“You didn’t stop me,” snapped Lana. “You could’ve bowed out at any time, but you didn’t. You used her resources every bit as much as I did.”

“You should have known the price would be too high!”

“Does that mean you…” said Wynston.

“What price?” snarled Lana. “I was confident there was a ninety-eight percent chance she would choose a mutual enemy. – Oh, wait, she did choose a mutual enemy. And you let him go!”

“I’m sorry, I was busy murdering his mother! Did that not work for you?”

“Ruth, I…”

“You could have stopped him!”

“I tried!”

“You left me alone to deal with Arcann, again!”

“I tried!”

Wynston raised his voice, well outside normal levels. “Dammit, I love you.”

The women stopped and stared.

“There,” he said. “Lana. Explain to me. Whom did Scythia choose?”

“Arcann.”

“Oh.” That was a deep hole. “Oh, so Senya was there.”

“Yes,” said Ruth.

“And now neither Senya nor Arcann is there.”

“Arcann survived,” said Lana. “Thanks to Ruth taking her time on the kill.”

“And if Scythia isn’t getting what she wants,” elaborated Wynston, “she is…going after Odessen.”

“There you have it,” grumbled Lana.

“I did all I could,” said Ruth.
“Would you please shut up until you can say that convincingly?” said Lana.

“Lana, you’ve obviously both been under considerable strain.”

“Not as bad as it’s about to be on Odessen.”

“Yes,” said Ruth. “There’s nothing else to be said.”

05:00: Koth

Koth brought the Gravestone around. Most of the Eternal Fleet had fled. He was just taking potshots at the remainder. The bombardment of the surface was all but over.

He had gotten a terse memo from Lana. Arcann, architect of some of the Eternal Empire’s worst crimes, had undergone a Voss ritual and escaped both Ruth and Lana.

Well, that explained why Vaylin had gone off on the planet. But nobody escaped Ruth and Lana. Something had to have gone wrong there, and it certainly wasn’t Lana. He wouldn’t have figured Ruth for the type to let her enemies walk. Hadn’t she hunted down and killed somebody on the Black Council for just threatening her son? And Arcann had devastated worlds, his own dominion Zakuul among them.

Something didn’t add up.

His holo beeped and he answered. Master Tebbith came up. “Koth. You seem to be the only person left answering.”

“Everyone else is on their way to Odessen,” he said. “Darth Scythia’s gone nuts.”

Tebbith’s mouth hung open for a moment. “How unexpected,” he said. “I have been helping in the city, but if Odessen is under attack…”

“Then you’d better get your ass up here. So to speak.”

“I told the Voss I would not abandon them.”

“They have fire departments, you know.”

“You’re right.” Tebbith joined his hands in their baggy sleeves. “I’ll find a transport immediately.”

So he was innocent of the entire Arcann matter. That was a little encouraging. Koth had put up with a lot of questionable decisions from Ruth Niral, the woman who hated Zakuul’s original benefactor and apparently didn’t mind its tyrant. If Arcann’s escape was intentional…

He brought the Gravestone around. There would be blood before there would be answers. It wasn’t like he didn’t understand that.

06:00: Vette
Vette handed up one more into the crammed ship. “And that's away!” She jumped to the landing platform. “Gimme another!”

Theron popped out of the crowd, Rylon firmly in hand. “Come on, this way. Aygo’s pointing.” He lowered his voice. “We're running out of ships.”

“I know,” said Vette. “Save one for your kid. All right, folks, right this way!” She sidled toward the next waiting ship. Theron walked with her. In fact, he clasped Rylon's shoulders and put him front and center. The kid looked terrified and looked like he was trying to hide it. Vette wasn't sure which parent had modeled that. Someday he'd be all grown up and staring down rancors. But that day was, apparently, not today.

Theron squeezed the kid’s shoulders. “With your life, Vette.”

“Oh, no. Not me.”

“Vette, I need you to–”

“As long as he’s with you you won’t do anything stupid.” She addressed Rylon, hardly needing to stoop to meet his eyes. “You stay close to Theron.” She winked. “Want to see a trick? We are going to fill the sky with people getting the hell out of here.”

Rylon looked at Theron. He looked at Vette. “Be careful,” he said solemnly.

“We'll have breakfast when we get together again. Go on. Keep Theron out of trouble.” She grinned and muttered, “If anything could.”

07:00: Calline

Calline was trying to keep her ship out of the establishment’s hands. It was locked, but she had been called out to the landing pads.

A man who towered over her even with her heeled boots came wading through the crowd, opposite the fleeing populace. “You,” he said. “Blue.”

Calline stopped, inwardly cringing. No good thing ever started with that epithet.

She recognized the man striding toward her. Human, red-bearded, scars on his face and swagger in his step. He had passed in the hallways half a dozen times in the past, usually doing the Imperial studious ignoring of anything alien passing by. She cringed more.

“Yeah?” she said.

“I hear you're the girl to go to for droids.”

“Huh.”

“I have freed up one non-safety-rated rig that is going to suckerpunch Scythia's command carrier. With,” he said cockily, “explosives of my own devising.”

“Not my ship,” she said.
“No, I’ve got a loaner. Conned it out of Mr. Shan. Deemed unsafe for manned flight, just my luck.”

“So your pilot is…?”

“You're good with droids. How are you with C2-N2?”

She waited for the catch. There was none.

She laughed.

He laughed.

It snapped something. She laughed harder. The thought of C2-N2 captaining a suicide charge at the people who had occasioned this entire panic was...perfect.

“Knew you were all right,” the big man said, and clapped her shoulder. “Let’s go.”

08:00: Lana

“Do we even know who is on Odessen? Do we have an evacuation list?”

“We should have in/out logs for anyone who scanned their credentials, which is most people who aren’t us,” said Wynston. He had been maddeningly calm since Lana had admitted the insanity of the morning.

“We never had an evacuation drill,” said Lana. “Hubris on our part?”

“We didn’t expect this exact use case,” said Wynston.

“Doesn’t that go for this entire trash fire? We weren’t prepared for this mission. I wasn't aware we were going to rescue Arcann when we reached Voss.” She flexed her silver hand and jerked her head at Ruth, who was looking both defensive and punchworthy. “At least her spurts of kindliness didn't cost anybody a limb this time.”

“She's saved our lives a hundred times over,” said Wynston.

“She can't save every child. And she's going to get us killed trying.”

Ruth’s face was doing its level best to fold in half downward. “I tried to kill Arcann!”

“With a ten-minute break for a floor show! You could have gotten to him if you'd just stopped Senya in time!”

“Please. Lana. This isn’t…”

“Stop siding with her!”

“We’re all tired. It’s been a rough few days, and there’s going to be a hard fight when we get out. Can we resume this when we’re ready to make future plans?”

“Don't be afraid. We're going to get through this.” Larr Gith was stroking a young Rodian's head and smiling. “Stay close with your father and mother, all right? Can you do that? It’s going to be a little bit crowded but they’ll be right there.” She ushered the family on.

Emergencies. Her original claim to fame. She deftly navigated the crowd by constantly convincing the crowd that it didn’t want to be where she wanted to go. Theron was coming close. “Theron, how are you holding up?”

“Good as I have to be,” he said bravely. He looked like somebody had dragged him in a bag of bricks around the block.

“I always liked the SIS,” she said sunnily. “That perfect combination of interesting and needy.”

She could feel his hackles rising. “This isn't the time, Larr.”

“You’ll be happy to know, I hope, that I gave the command to pack people before equipment. Oggurobb was inconsolable but the rest of us will deal.”

“I…yes. Thank you. The things you get to do when the Imperial contingent isn’t at the wheel.”

Poor boy had been Sithed too long. She would take him as a charity case if they ever got the time. “I’m going to ops. We’re about to get an enemy fleet dropped into orbit and, as it happens, I’ve got military experience.” Not that the Sith had ever listened for that.

Surprise was a good look for those tawny eyes. “You are going to have to tell me about that. Later.”

“If you need anything, call.” She waved with a cheerful flourish. Rescuing planets from Sith schemes. Somehow not riding forth to do it had worked out. She felt like a hero already.

Theron was pacing on the landing pads. Above, the last evacuating ships dotted the upper atmosphere. They had their orders: a dispersal into three different star systems, well away from here.

Calline finally showed up. Theron planted his feet. “Where the hell have you been? All ships were due out an hour ago!”

Calline pointed. “Helping.”

Major Pierce swaggered up. “This woman,” he said, “has the hands of a goddess.”

Theron gaped. “You are not saying what I think you just said.”

Calline punched Pierce. He staggered and scowled. “Now, wait just a-”
She stabbed a finger at the opening ship. “Coming?”

“Only if we stay to watch.”

“No,” said Theron. “I’ve got a kid here.”

“He can watch,” Pierce said, in what was probably supposed to be a generous tone.

“No,” said Theron.

“I don’t work for you,” said Pierce.

“No. You work for this guy’s mother. She wants him safe.”

Pierce made a gesture that was, very briefly, very rude. “Fine,” he said.

Theron was pretty sure he knew when Calline was rolling her eyes. “I’ll leave a camera probe,” she said. She beckoned again. Pierce strolled on board.

Larr Gith’s voice crackled on holo. “I’ve got four people and nine droids manning the guns. How many are we still missing?”

“Seventeen,” said Theron. “I’ll make one more sweep. Time for you to roll up the carpet, Larr.”

“Not this time. Go on, I’ll get the others out on land.”

“Don’t be a hero now.”

“If not in a planetary-destruction battle royale, then when?” She saluted boisterously. “See you on the other side, Theron. Tell Ruth she’s a bore.”

“Tell her yourself.” He clamped his mouth shut.

Her eyes sparkled. “You almost said Master Jedi. You almost said it!”

“Theron out.”

How much more could he rescue here? What else could he fix? He couldn't stay. Rylon needed him. He only felt like slightly less of a coward for having that excuse. He couldn’t stay. He could only monitor comms. He couldn’t expect the rest of the command staff for thirty-six hours. Could he hold it together that long against the most brutally thorough master of the Dark Council?

Well. He was about to find out.

“Ruth,” he whispered. “Love. Any time you’re ready.”

11:00: Ruth

Torian pounded on the door. Ruth let him in.

“One hour,” he said. “Still a day and a half until we’re within range of the emergency rendezvous. We’re monitoring holo channels.”
“You have enough for a squad for each of us?” Lana said shortly.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Thank you.” Lana shot Ruth a withering look. “We’ll discuss.” She walked out with him.

Wynston looked at Ruth almost apologetically. The tension in the room dropped to a vague suggestion around the floorboards. Wynston reached for Ruth’s elbow. “Answer me something, Ruth.”

“Anything.”

“Did you try when you got the order?”

“Yes. Wynston, I swear, I killed everything in my path, it just wasn’t fast enough.”

“I believe you. But this is a disaster. A lot of people will be looking for someone to blame.” His red eyes flared. “I’ve never seen her terrified before.”

“Her? My fiancé and son are there!”

“I know. But she's starting to see a pattern with these Arcann encounters and I'm afraid I am, too.”

The tension was no longer low. “What are you saying?”

“I don't know yet. When I decide, you will be one of the first to know.”

Losing Wynston sounded a lot like losing oxygen. He had just been there for her ever since she’d rescued him. She just assumed that…that…well, first things first. “Does she want to replace me?”

“She doesn't want to lead. She'll pick someone else to support.”

Her stomach crawled. “You, Wynston?”

“It won't come to that.” He said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly.

What a disaster.

“Ruth,” he said. “My association with Lana has always been underpinned by certain facts and certain requirements. If I have to start over…”

“You don’t have to tell me you love her. I already know.” And under any other circumstance she wouldn’t interfere.

“I’m not the man who can make that his sole consideration.”

“If you’re going to be wrong…this is the time I would understand why.”

“We need to remove Arcann, which we knew about, and frustrate Scythia, which was very nearly voted Odessen’s national sport. We’re in a very bad position to do those things right now. But I believe we have the right people for the job. I believe we can do this. And I believe…”

“What?” Lana said acidly from the doorway.

“I believe we have a battle to win,” said Wynston, and turned away from Ruth.
The Thirteenth Hour

Chapter Summary

The Alliance gathers at its rendezvous points to escape Darth Scythia's bombing of Odessen. Ruth, Wynston, and Lana, plus Tebbith and Koth, plus Rylon and Pierce and Calline, talk.

Ninety people were in orbit as the skeleton crews of the mismatched set of gunships that had been left to defend Odessen. (Why leave more? Vaylin’s fleet had been accounted for. Republic and Empire wouldn’t be self-destructive enough to betray them just yet. Sith logic.) It wasn’t supposed to withstand an invasion. There wasn’t supposed to be an invasion. Scythia had been an ally.

What the hell had Ruth and Lana done out there?

Larr Gith and seventeen townsfolk of Odessen sat in a cave two hundred klicks out from the settlement. At Theron’s recommendation, Larr Gith had left a web of camera probes. At that bounty hunter’s recommendation the control code had been sent for a probe in the lower atmosphere, within view of the defenders. Two battery-powered holoprojectors had already been erected in the cave. When Darth Scythia’s fleet came to destroy the town – to use a generous term – the sheltered gathering, the ones who hadn’t made it to the evacuation in time, would have a front-row seat.

Four people had stayed on the surface to man ion cannons, and the more intrepid droids manned more. She had heard C2-N2 screaming as someone hauled him toward one of the landing pads. Odessen wouldn’t go without a whimper.

Larr had tried to talk some of them into leaving. If Odessen was going to burn, there was no point sitting there shooting spitballs back at the burners. But some people insisted on being heroes. She’d be a hypocrite to fight that. She’d given them a respectful bow and a good word. People liked that.

“After the shields go, ten minutes, by the estimates,” said Larr Gith. “They won’t stay for long. Once they see there’s nobody to bomb…”

“Do we build Odessen again?” said one woman. “We were hardly finished with it the first time.”

“We’ll want a place we can build in peace,” said Larr Gith. She dimly remembered a discussion about boring geographical qualities of “potential” locations. There must already be spies en route to the new place, mixed in with the real Alliance. It seemed pointless to build up a whole new base knowing that it would go straight to the top of so many people’s lists of places to destroy.

Then again, knowing Darth Scythia’s thoroughness, scraping Odessen clean of the debris would be starting over anyway.

Larr Gith did not feel attached to Odessen, despite her months here. She hadn’t exactly given her life to the Alliance. She had mostly just given a shot of sanity to counter the Imperials and Sith. Tebbith preferred to avoid politics and that SIS cutie was surgically grafted onto Ruth, which left Larr. (She could blame him for his taste, but she had to admit that spies weren’t picked for their
ideological purity.)

But looking now at the ships descending into the view of the hastily configured holoprojector, she realized that she didn’t want this destroyed. She didn’t want these people scattered. She didn’t want these countrymen of a strange new nation to die for the causes she pursued. She wanted to save them.

Besides, they were desperately in need of someone good-looking to carry the banner.

Things burst into light in the orbital holo view. Someone groaned. “Maker. We should’ve run further. We should’ve run further.”

“They won’t have time to burn this far before our fleet shows up,” said Larr Gith. “And why would they? It’s wilderness. They’ll be looking at the settlement shields.” That seemed like not much logic for very much problem. “For what it’s worth, Vaylin and Scythia are both out of their league. The only live…ish…person ever to scour a planet clean of life is on our side now. In theory.”

Several people turned wide eyes to her while one spoke. “Wh-what does that mean?” said one woman.

That had sounded better in her head. “Oh.” Of course Ruth’s subletter wouldn’t be common knowledge. “It means the Sith are going to show up with firepower.”

“Which Sith?” grumbled another, Oryn. “Seems we have enough here.”

Cannon fire started streaming from the mismatched Odessen defenders to the rigid rank of Darth Scythia’s task force. And back.

Larr Gith remembered countless boarding actions on Imperial ships. She knew her way around the smaller corvettes by heart, had even flown one once. She had cleansed a carrier stem to stern and left a crew behind to turn the thing to good for once.

But here she had no boarding pod and no transport up to use it. Two carriers formed the backbone of Scythia’s task force, and the destroyers and frigates on Odessen’s side were badly, badly outmatched. They were swarming the smaller ships, making it impossible for the carriers to fire without menacing their own. Larr Gith bit her lip and watched.

Then one of the cruisers tilted away. It started the other half of this assault.

The holo display from the surface showed the first impacts ripping at the horizon. Larr Gith shorted. “Amateurs.”

“What’s that, Master Jedi?” said the wide-eyed one who had spoken earlier.

“They can’t bring their ships to bear here so they’re splitting. Poor strategy. It gives our ships the advantage.”

The ion cannons on the surface were pounding into rhythmic action. Another ground impact, closer. Larr Gith shut her mouth to keep her heart from escaping her throat. Her bedroom was over there. It had been lavishly furnished. She had had a few guests there, and they had been duly impressed. The ion cannons started groaning but they kept going. Fire sloped through her field of view and hit the shapes of Odessen’s main base, lines whose only major crimes were aesthetic.

“They’re on their way, right?” said the talkative woman. Valith, Larr thought distantly. “They’ll come back to us.”
“Our people just defeated the Eternal Fleet’s latest attack over Voss,” Larr exaggerated. “They’re on their way home, Valith.”

The woman ducked her head as if honored by the name. “Why did anyone let them leave with so many?”

“We had a promise of help,” said Larr Gith. “Darth Scythia keeps her word. Or at least she did.”

“A Sith,” spat someone else. Oryn. “Begging your pardon, Master Jedi, but if this doesn’t teach the Outlander that she can’t depend on the Empire…”

“The next step will be joint,” said Larr Gith. She could give a lot of words about the Outlander just then, her and her Sith friends; but she felt a stab of something like maturity, and kept it quiet. She was here to lead, not commentate.

Oh, but she would circle back around to that when she saw her colleagues again.

One of the Odessen ships broke in half and started falling planetward. How many died there? The bare minimum to operate it. Ten? Eleven?

“There is no death,” she said, aware of her audience but also not completely disingenuous. “There is the Force.”

“Beats what I heard from Sith for fifty-six years,” grumbled Oryn.

“And always will,” said Larr. “When the main force arrives we’ll have another ship to get to the rendezvous point. Until then we just have to stick together.”

A chunky but wobbly-looking ship rose into view of the lower cameras. In a seesawing burn of thrusters it climbed up into the atmosphere. Three minutes later it showed up in the scene of the space battle.

“What is that…” muttered Larr Gith.

“I heard the Chiss bounty hunter talk about something on her way out,” volunteered Valith. “She was laughing with that officer, the redhead.”

“Was she, now?” Tuck that tidbit away for future use. Major Pierce was mostly just Ruth’s way of rubbing in Imperial superiority, but if he had a soft spot for Wynston’s tight-lipped sister…well, only a very idealistic Jedi would fail to file that away under ‘In case of leverage required…”

The ship meandered gracelessly toward the carrier that was bombarding the planet. Small fire around it missed due mostly to its chaotic motion. The pilot must be automated or crazy.

It plowed into the carrier’s bridge and detonated.

Larr Gith was not a connoisseur of destruction. She didn’t enjoy watching things people had put time and love, or at least time, into, ripped to pieces. But there was a certain charm in the first hot ring of expansion, the rippling thrust of the ship as it ate away the levels above bridge while dragging its bursting belly into where command had been. For a few glorious seconds Larr Gith could imagine that Darth Scythia had been standing there.

But Scythia was smarter than that, and the bombardment was intensifying with the help of the other ships.
“Don’t be afraid,” she said heroically. “That sky won’t always be theirs.”

It should never have been theirs at all. But that was a talk to have later. Larr Gith had known from the start that she couldn’t eject the Sith from the Alliance. But she’d be damned if she didn’t hold them to account for disasters like this. Their brethren had done this. Not hers.

Larr Gith watched, and pretended she wasn’t helpless.

* 

The Boorcati Ch’at Baversco was called the Second Star to the Right in Basic. Calline had always declined to explain what that meant. Theron gathered it had something to do with her brother Wynston, but what, he didn’t know. Wynston himself was cordially silent on matters of Chiss culture.

The bounty hunter was on the bridge. The other final evacuees from Odessen sat in a little round area just behind. It had an uncomfortable grate floor and flimsy-looking walls. The rendezvous point, one of three for a full Odessen evacuation, was coming closer every minute.

“Don’t remember me, do you, mate?” Major Pierce was addressing Rylon.

“I do,” said Rylon. “You’ve said hi.”

“No, I mean before.” Pierce leaned against the wall and relaxed. “I knew you when you were a babe in arms.”

Rylon gave him a wide-eyed study. The lack of uniform had to be throwing him off. “You’re a soldier, right? Did you serve with my father?”

“Only briefly.” Theron shot him a warning look. “After he left I served as captain of your mother's guard.”

“Did you look for her when she was locked up?”

“Any scrap of information I could beg, borrow, bribe, or steal. Heh. In the end she found me.”

There was a big gap there, but Rylon didn’t seem to see it. Instead he circled back. “But you served with my father?”

“Sure. Sorriest excuse for a soldier and man I ever-”

“Pierce,” said Theron.

Pierce looked up at him, first with a negligent half-grin, then more intently. Theron stared right back. Pierce raised his eyebrows and Theron shook his head, ever so slightly, trying hard to stay neutral. Pierce’s expression splashed through disbelief and came up on raw hilarity. He threw his head back and laughed loud enough to shake the ship’s fixtures. “Emperor’s name, man.”

“Her wishes,” said Theron.

Rylon sat up straighter. “No,” he said. “What is he not saying? Why don’t I ever meet people who knew my father?”

Theron wanted to tread lightly. The kid had been through a lot, and right now he was separated from his mother by a lot of lightyears and one crazed Sith. Nobody was going to get rest or relaxation for a while. He needed something gentle. “Your mother didn’t keep many people from
her early career,” he hedged. “It’s an Imperial thing.”

“But she kept Pierce. How come? Did she like him more than Father?”

Pierce made a tortured sound that appeared to be a giggle-snort badly muffled by one brawny arm. “Don’t think so,” he chortled.

“I think that’s enough history,” said Theron. “Do we know where we’re going?”

“Rendezvous One,” Calline yelled back. “Three hours.” She seemed to consider this a complete contribution to the conversation.

“And then?” said Pierce.

“We’ve got a fallback spot,” said Theron. Lana had scouted that out a long time ago in case...well, in case of a disaster like this. “We gather at the three rendezvous spots, make sure everyone’s accounted for, then chart a course to Ephel.”

“Where we start from scratch?”

“There’s an old complex there Lana found. We’ll have to expand it, a lot, but it’s better than nothing.”

Rylon was looking intently at him. He had probably checked out of the conversation thirty seconds ago. “Hey,” said Theron. “You can ask your mom about your father’s service with Pierce when we get where we’re going.”

“She never says anything.”

“Well, that’s her choice, too. Don’t worry. It won’t be forever.” Someday Rylon had to know about what his father had done. Ruth felt he deserved the chance to love Quinn first. Ruth was, he had to admit, a softie.

Pierce interrupted that freefall. “Don’t you wonder about the unofficial version?”

Theron had seen and heard enough of Malavai Quinn to make any ten normal people miserable. “No,” he said honestly.

Just then an astromech finished tipping and trundling up the stairs from below. <Faulty transmitter = removed // ship + monkey-lizard = false>

Everyone looked.

“Come again?” said Pierce.

“Teefive,” yelled Calline. “Good job.”

<Odessen people = new home?> the droid beeped conversationally, spinning its round green head.

“That’s right,” said Rylon. He seemed to latch on to the droid as the only conversation partner he could manage. “Have you ever been to Ephel?”

<Ephel rofl>, said the droid. <rofl rofl rofl...Negative.>

“Oh.” Rylon sat cross-legged and commenced getting to know the astromech droid with the faulty language libraries.
Theron kept a sharp eye on Pierce for as long as he could stay awake, which was a long time later.

“We’re not getting anybody on holo, are we,” Ruth said glumly.

“No,” said Wynston before Lana could open her mouth.

“We didn’t leave enough ships behind,” said Ruth. “Scythia is going to…”

“I know,” said Wynston.

“We all know,” said Lana. “Maybe if you had taken some advice before starting this operation…”

“I know,” said Wynston, mostly to head off Ruth. Ruth shot him a venomous look but subsided.

“This is the worst it’s going to get with Scythia,” said Wynston. “We will destroy her fleet. She’ll be forced into hiding. She’s made her point, but we’ll take her power vacuum.”

“Like Virinos Geth,” said Ruth. “Only less dead.”

“We can fix that if we have to.”

“Scythia isn’t the enemy,” Ruth said miserably. “She’s a Sith, yes, but a stable one. Vaylin is the enemy. And Vaylin got her fleet out because we disengaged to deal with Scythia.”

“Funny, that,” muttered Lana.

“What do you want to tell me I was wrong, Lana? Do you want to explain to me how much better things would be if you were in charge?”

Lana rolled her shoulders, hard. “No. When I say what I have to say it’ll be in front of the entire command staff.”

Ruth looked pleadingly at Wynston. He had nothing constructive to add, but he did try. “Until then we can only prepare for the battle. I’ll monitor the flight. You two, get some rest.”

He stepped into the hall and down toward the cargo compartment. Sounds of rowdy merriment banged within. Wynston knocked, and wondered whether they’d managed to bring kri’gee or something. He’d been clean for what felt like forever, but there were times and places where he missed that.

Torian Cadera answered. Wynston nodded courteously, which Torian returned. “Sir?” the younger man said alertly.

“Nothing new to report,” said Wynston. “There are a few hours yet before we get word from Odessen. I realize these aren’t ideal circumstances. We’re tired and we’re on edge.”

“We’re ready, sir.”

Wynston had to smile. “Wait for the order. If it’s against our enemies.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Very good. I’m counting on your discretion. If you hear anything in the other room, try to ignore it. If anybody gets thrown out, try to subdue them.” It was only mostly a joke. “Thank you for your
service. We’ll see what there is to see soon.”

Then he headed to the bridge to sleep.

*

Closed in the tiny room with a sulking Lana, Ruth meditated.

She had relearned her son’s presence since being reunited with him on Tython...a year?...surely only a day or two ago. Day by day she had felt him, alive, flitting back and forth at study and at play. Ruth was not an expert on remote use of the Force but when her child was near he was in her every breath and the Force ran between them in an unbroken chain.

She meditated now. Distance and hyperspace prevented a connection. She was alone with one ferocious glow and the background chatter of Force-blinds. Life was here, yes, in small and strained amounts.

Ruth meditated. Far away, someone must have made her family safe. There was but one heart among the three of them. It wouldn’t break today.

*

“You okay?” said Koth.

Tebbith looked up. He had settled cross-legged on the floor in the holo room. Now Koth leaned in the doorway from the direction of the bridge.

“I’m fine, thank you,” said Tebbith.

“I kind of meant the–” he gestured a line over his scalp. “It’s bleeding.”

“Oh.” Tebbith brought a hand up to check. The contact stung. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Next person who tells me meditation heightens your awareness is getting laughed out of the room.” He lifted a small white case. “Hold still. We’ll get you fixed up.”

“I can just–”

“Hey. Let me do my job.”

Tebbith obligingly held still. “You talk like you’re used to...this.”

“Patching up Jedi? First time. Don’t hold it against me. Fighting battles? Yeah. I was in military service for a while even before I joined up with the Alliance.”

“So you’ve mentioned. It’s a conversion I don’t hear about every day.”

“I know,” Koth said quietly. “It’s mostly droids and zealots now. One of those you can actually deprogram.” He dabbed at Tebbith’s scalp. “You okay? I know you don’t like going out in the field.”

“I think I helped some. Some days that’s all you can hope for.” Koth was smoothing some kind of pad over the scratch. “I...thank you. I didn’t mean to be a bother.”

“If keeping my friends intact is a bother, let me be annoyed all the time.” Koth straightened and smiled. “There. Not so bad.”
“Do you know where we’re going?”
“I have the rendezvous coordinates.”
“Yes, but where and why?”
“I don’t know,” said Koth.
“Oh.” Tebbith was a Jedi. Sometimes orders just came.
“I’ll say this for the Outlander: Apart from that detail about the Emperor, she keeps her people informed. We’ll get answers when we get there.”
“If something has menaced Odessen…if something will keep us from getting back…”
“Once before I started over with nothing but a crew and a target on my back. I got over it.” Koth nodded at no one in particular. “So can we.”

They kept talking for minutes that somewhere eased into hours. There was a lot they couldn’t change, but the company wasn’t bad. The Alliance wasn’t broken yet.

A long time later, Koth leaned back and sighed. “You know, you’re not what I expected from a Jedi.”

“Have you known many?”

“You and Queen Gith, really.”

“Ah. I…yes. She got the personality and I got the rulebooks.”

Koth didn’t smile. “Who told you that?”

“Er…she did, in point of fact.”

“Running into an orbital bombardment to help people would qualify as a personality trait. Though, to be honest, either way… I always thought the Jedi type would be more…” he gestured grandly…“aloof.”

“Try me in fifty years,” Tebbith said uneasily. “Maybe I’ll have learned by then.”

“We’ll see each other before then, won’t we?”

He liked the idea. “I expect so.”
The Alliance converges on their fallback position: Ephel. Empress Acina offers an alliance. Ruth faces the consequences of her failure to kill Arcann. (Larr Gith, Jorgan, Vette, Pierce, Calline, T5-M7, Acina, Ruth, Lana, Wynston, Rylon, Tebbith, Theron, Koth)

Larr Gith had stopped moving. She had stopped listening. Had she thought about it, she would suspect she had stopped breathing.

It had been twelve hours. Scythia’s task force had destroyed Odessen’s defenders and slammed the surface, going not for breadth (lucky) but depth, crushing until surely even the best-protected tunnels of Odessen’s complex had been collapsed or flooded with stray utilities.

The disabled cruiser was sinking lower with every hour and Larr Gith didn’t want to move until the son of a bantha had hit ground. That’s when she saw it. One of the smaller ships winked into hyperspace. The raid was over.

Which is why Larr Gith was surprised when half a dozen heavy Imperial vessels materialized out of nowhere.

“It’s Scythia,” said someone behind her. Rovexin, she thought. “The first part was just to play with us.”

Larr Gith was digging for her holo. “Just a minute.”

“Master Jedi, the task force will track us if you call now.”

The ships in space had opened streaking fire on Scythia’s forces, slamming two ships into pieces before the counter volley appeared. “I think we just met the counter to that task force, Rovexin.” She finished freeing the device. “Odessen to Imperial task force. Please respond.”

There was a flicker notifying message forwarding. The woman who answered wore elaborate Sith robes and a severe bun. She looked Larr Gith over with professional condescension. Larr Gith returned. She knew this face from briefings. And she never forgot a name. “Empress Acina.”

“Larr Gith,” she said, nodding obliquely. “I can’t say I’m surprised to meet you. May I assume you speak for your Alliance?”

Larr’s insides started glowing, the first pleasant sensation in what felt like years. “Oh, do,” she purred.

“I wish to join the Empire to your cause.”

Acina looked at Larr Gith.

Larr Gith looked at Acina.
Acina looked at Larr Gith.

Larr Gith, with effort, closed her mouth.

“It’s a genuine offer,” said Acina.

“Let me get back to you on that,” said Larr Gith. “Oh, and be very ready to explain yourself when the fleet gets back. They’re going to be in a shoot-first mood.”

Acina spread her hands out flat. “In these times, aren’t we all?”

*

Jorgan signed off the latest call. Now that Rendezvous Two had gathered its ships from the evacuation of Odessen he’d made a full circuit of the ships, calling each one in turn. Everyone accounted for. If this were a military operation Jorgan would be proud.

Maybe he was proud anyway.

Someone holoed and he answered. The little Twi’lek Vette came up. “Just got off the horn with Theron,” she said evenly. “Rendezvous One and Three are accounted for.”

Jorgan nodded. “Rendezvous Two accounted for. No sign of pursuit. I think it’s time to jump to Fallback One.”

“You guys, uh, doing okay?”

“I got a lot of civilian transports,” said Jorgan, “and not many experts to help psychologically. Morale is low. Though,” he gave the bridge of his nose a sad little rub, “I do have one guy with a foolproof plan to fully fund the reconstruction not to mention re-purchase personal possessions destroyed after our departure…”

“Yea tall, Devaronian, broken horn?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Don’t trust him. Do what he says, because it’s profitable, but don’t trust him.”

“This a smuggler thing?”

“It’s a Gault thing. Aaanyway, I’d better manage some things here. We’ve got a big new town to build up from scratch.” Vette fidgeted in place. She lowered her voice. “Am I the only one who’s terrified here?”

Jorgan looked around. He leaned in. “No,” he muttered gruffly, and straightened again. “We’ve got a lot of work to do. You need a soldier, call me.”

“You need a rogue, you know where to find me.”

“Later, then.” Jorgan took a deep breath. One more call, just to check with Theron. He’d sent the coordinates for their ultimate destination, an abandoned world called Ephel. He wasn’t stupid enough to think this would get easy when they hit the ground. And he wasn’t stupid enough to think that in the command staff’s absence everyone would accept him as an authority.

But he could only deal with that one fight at a time.
“Here we are,” said Pierce. “Two hours to our happy new home.”

“Hm,” said Calline. She had left T5-M7 at the navicomputer and the boy and low-resemblance father upstairs. She was sitting downstairs, eyeing the dartboard and hefting a handful of darts.

“You’re not half bad in this thing,” said Pierce. “Could be even better with some new hardware.”

She rolled her eyes and wondered whether this Imp would even detect that on a Chiss. “Don’t say you’re offering.”

He shrugged, grinning. “Didn’t say I’m not.”

She cast her eyes to the ceiling, then the board. “Things I’m not attracted to: Imps.” She tossed and hit the nerf’s eye. “Humans.” A second. “Maniacs.” The third knocked the first to the floor. “Men.” She finished the cluster. “You.” She flicked the last dart at his face.

He caught it in flight and chuckled. “You can’t put out a sign like that and expect the hounds to stay away.”

“Not a dog person.” She kicked up and headed to the stairs, facing him all the while. She backed up step by step, keeping her ass firmly out of his sight, until she reached the upper floor and headed to the bridge to pat T5.

<Armored lady = annoyed? // Pineapple = called for>

“Oh, there’ll be drinks,” muttered Calline. “Keep going.”

* 

When Ruth came out of hyperspace as the vanguard of the fleet, she found none of Odessen’s ships. What she did find was a cluster of Imperial ships that were conspicuously not firing on the surface.

They hailed her on holo immediately. Ruth answered. She saw the flicker of forwarding. Someone who wasn’t in this scene wanted to talk to her.

The other person came up. Ruth gaped.

“My lord Wrath,” said Empress Acina. “I dealt with Darth Scythia’s insurrection. Say the word and the Empire doesn’t attack you again.”

Oh, what wouldn’t she have given for that guarantee in previous years? It rang, of course, false. “Not to look a gift varactyl in the mouth, but should I chronicle the number of times you tried to have me killed?”

“The nature of the game, Wrath. You would have done the same to me.”

“I never did.” Ruth looked at the black smudges in the atmosphere where her home had been. “I hold myself to certain standards, Acina. If we’re to work together, I expect you to raise yours.”

Wynston mumbled something. It sounded a lot like “Yess.”

“Of course,” Acina said blandly. “Can we discuss in person? On Dromund Kaas. It would be...a
homecoming.”

“Things are a little busy. As you can see my main population center was just wiped off the planetary surface. I have matters to attend to. Is one week acceptable?”

“I look forward to it.”

*

Ephel was a huge world covered in rapidly moving green clouds. The surface viewed in whorling fits and starts was mostly blue water, a tangle of silver-laced green lowlands, and rugged brown mountains. The polar caps were white spatters at each end of the axis. The location was no cause for complaint; from here in the Mid Rim it could support strikes to any major power within a couple of days.

Or receive them, Ruth supposed.

“Usable atmosphere?” said Ruth.

“Completely,” said Lana. “Every species we carry that didn’t use a rebreather on Odessen won’t need a rebreather here.”

“What does our resource management look like?”

Lana went briskly through the attributes of the settlement spot she had chosen. It was the location of an ancient temple of unknown denomination. Not exactly wired for electricity, but the construction was supposedly fantastically stable, and the valley the temple looked onto was both defensible and well provisioned.

There was a broad flat stone expanse at the temple’s rear. This was where Ruth’s ship touched down. She followed Lana out onto the rough surface. The sun was greenish and the breeze was warm.

“Lana…” said Ruth.

“Yes?” Lana said blandly.

“The Dark Side is strong here. It’s…” she sniffed, adding air to the uneasy mix creeping in her gut…”even a Force-blind would notice.”

“I thought it would be useful.”

“For whom? You’re the only Dark Sider here.”

“I didn’t realize that back when I chose it. And you never reviewed the decision.” Lana crossed her arms over her chest. “So do you want to complain now?”

“Who worshipped here, really?”

“Not the survivors, obviously.” She turned away. “Come on.”

*

Lana and Wynston had volunteered to manage traffic to start with. Ruth walked a quarter mile down the flat rock’s surface, wondering a little at the brown-and-white mélange of crystals packed
into the stone, and finally sent Theron the coordinates for landing a little clear of everyone else.

And Calline’s lumpy ship came to her.

It settled with grace. Calline was an understated and very competent pilot. Ruth was grateful Theron had chosen her.

He was second off the transport. Rylon was first.

Ruth sprinted up and knocked them both back to the ramp. Alive. Alive. Odessen had burned but her family hadn’t. She curled up to kiss Rylon’s forehead and unwound to kiss Theron’s cheek. “Are you okay?” she whispered.

“I’m fine, Mom,” mumbled Rylon. Ruth backed up and stood, offering them both a hand up. Their weight reassured her.

“What happened?” said Theron. “There wasn’t much time…”

“We’ll discuss that in ops. As soon as ops exists.” She nodded at Calline and Pierce as they walked down, and turned with them toward the temple.

Theron took up his place at her side and spoke low. “Ruth, listen. When we were getting ready to go…Rylon. You called him ‘our son.’"

“I know,” said Ruth. “I was thinking of you.”

He took her hand. She squeezed his, and fiddled with her little corusca ring until he had to feel it against his palm. He let out a little breath. “We’re okay,” he murmured.

“We’re okay,” she whispered back, and stroked Rylon’s hand with her thumb. They were here. They were here.

*

Wynston saw Calline’s helmet above the level of the crowd. He stopped waving directions and started working his way over. “Calline!” he yelled. “Calline!”

She angled over to meet him. “You okay?” she said in her rough alto.

“Fine. You?”

“We got through. Theron and his kid are okay.”

“Glad to hear it. Do you think you can help clearing dormitories out for temporary space? Physical lifting, a little dull.”

She ducked her head. “Fine.”

“Got it. Thank you, Calline. If you need anything I won’t be far.”

The crowd bobbed them a little away from another. Calline surged back to his side. “You…” she said.

“What?”

“You did good. Whatever happened back there. You did good.”
Given the total destruction of his temporary absence he didn’t know whether he was going to hear that for a while. He touched his side part and nodded a little. “Thank you.”

*

Larr Gith was surrounded by people who wouldn’t appreciate the aesthetics of Ephel Temple. The new base of the Alliance was high and long, built into a gorge that opened out into a river-soothed valley and tunneled deep into the hills behind. It reeked of the Dark Side, but that’s what happened when you let the local Sith pick the arrangements. Larr Gith felt her own Force there serenely underpinning the creep of the shadow. Lana and Ruth probably thought this would bother her. They didn’t realize how secure she’d become. Just because she was fabulous didn’t mean she wasn’t secretly amazing.

The stone here was the same as on the plateau above: a tight-packed mix of crystals and rough pebbles in white and light brown, sheared off here and polished like glass. The creators of the temple hadn’t embellished it much. The thick pillars had some ornamentation at the top, but nothing at the bottom would distract a newcomer from their thoughts. Or the darkness around them.

She followed Lana and the others to the room that would be ops. It stood directly over the great hall. It had high window slits filtering greenish sunlight into the pale brown room. There was a mosaic on the floor, muted shades in shapes she had to assume were artistic.

People were installing consoles and a holoprojector.

Ruth folded her hands behind her back. “The evacuation was successful,” she said. “Ninety-four dead in the defense of Odessen. No one unaccounted for. And here we are. A new place. A new chance. A more secure home. The work on rendering the place habitable is going lightning-fast. We’ve done a good job, but there’s a lot left to do. It’s building Odessen all over again.”

“An enterprise you weren’t there for,” Lana said crisply. “Everyone, the event that forced this evacuation, Scythia’s attack on Odessen, it wasn’t random and it wasn’t unprovoked.”

Even the workers still.

“Vaylin was attacking Voss because Arcann was there,” announced Lana. “Darth Scythia contacted us to specify that Arcann’s death was required. Ruth and I were unable to destroy Senya in time to stop her son.”

Larr Gith sensed that someone had better jump in. “In other news, Scythia pounded the hell out of Odessen’s surface. After the main action their retreat was interrupted by Empress Acina, who wanted to make nice.”

Theron stepped up. “Larr Gith and I spearheaded the evacuation of Odessen. It went well, all things considered. We’ve got a lot to be grateful for.”

“I’ll be supervising the move in,” said Ruth. “We already have a foreman with some crew evaluating the place. Once we have it wired for electricity and have the drains clear we’ll be most of the way to a working town. We’ll bring back the contractors to build permanent quarters so we’re not in dormitories indefinitely. I think our specialists will be very happy with the space available to them. I’ll be negotiating with Acina personally.”

“Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself,” Lana said. Loudly.

“What is it?” said Ruth.
“There’s one outstanding item. I suggest that the Outlander, Ruth Niral, step down from the administration of this facility.”

“Is this the time?” breathed Wynston. Every being in that room heard it.

“Ruth’s resolve is compromised,” announced Lana. Larr Gith looked immediately to Ruth. The lean Human looked stunned. “Yes, Senya prevented us from killing her son when Scythia called for his death. But does anyone here believe that both myself and the Outlander would be stopped by one woman? Or stymied by one wounded man? I gave everything in that pursuit.” She raised a gleaming hand. “I have reason to believe that she did not.”

“That’s enough,” Theron said loudly. “No one seriously believes that-”

Koth spoke from the doorway. “Run that one by me again?” His voice was a scythe across the chamber.

“The Outlander and I found Arcann wounded and vulnerable, and he came away alive.” Lana held her head high, searching each listener in turn and not coming away happy. “In the heat of battle she apologized to the woman who protected our nemesis the butcher of Zakuul. She waited to grant peace, when the future of the Alliance demanded action. And, lest you believe this was an isolated incident, let me remind you that the first time Arcann came for us, Ruth left her station and her friends to go haring off halfway across the galaxy to retrieve her son based on her ex-lover’s rumor.”

“That’s not fair,” burst Theron.

Tebbith had crept in after Koth. “Lana,” he said quietly, “think about what you’re saying.”

“She’s sold us out for a child, not once, costing us her apprentice and my hand, but twice, costing us Odessen, our home, with scores dead. Months of progress has been wiped out and we’re all paying for it. More lives than the two she saved were lost for her feelings. We cannot afford to let her tender sensibilities lead us to ruin a third time.”

“Be realistic. Has she ever led you wrong?” Theron said flatly.

No one breathed.

It went on.

Larr Gith thought it through. Every Arcann encounter had been a catastrophe since she came on board. With Ruth firmly at the controls. And now the half-assed Sith was standing here like she had run out of things to say or air to say them with. With her gone…with her gone a Jedi might finally take hold of this operation. A Jedi like Larr. All this for the price of saying what was true about Ruth having led them wrong. “Isn’t somebody going to say it?” she said clearly. “Yes.”

A cloud slid from slit to slit outside, leaving the room just that much more in the dark.

Ruth opened her mouth. After a moment it didn’t move. Larr Gith had always imagined that that was what drowning looked like.

“You’re wrong,” said Theron.

His voice was sudden, loud, clear, his Republic accent pronounced, his delivery somewhat grand. He turned to Larr Gith. “With respect, Larr, you’ve got it wrong.” He turned to Koth. “I understand your concerns, but I think you’re mistaken.” He turned to Lana. “I don’t want this to be a fight,
but…have you lost your mind? I don’t know what to do here at the end of resources, which we can recover, and sanity, which we’ve pretty much spilled all over the place. But I will say this. About Ruth, you’re wrong. I don’t understand how you don’t see that. She has given everything. She is a leader, our leader, not because we deserve her but because her commitment runs bone-deep. Her experience, her power, her compassion – they have saved our lives over and over again. Our shelter is a shelter because she fights for it and our battles are our battles because she’s going up against the worst powers of the galaxy. To benefit us. She has given everything up, for us.”

Lana bit into the silence and savaged it. “So everything I did,” she said, “only I also woke her up so she could do it.”

“I gave you every chance to speak,” said Ruth. “You took me up on it and I thanked you for that. Where is this coming from?”

Lana glared back. Theron was scanning the rest of the room, the still people, Larr among them. “Shame on you. I’m just a man with a blaster but I understand that the passion that keeps this Alliance together isn’t mine. It’s all, all of us, reflections of hers. I put my life in her hands with my eyes open. I suggest you do the same.”

“I don’t trust her hands,” said Lana, “and somewhat rely on the replacement I got after the first time she abandoned us. We could put it to a vote.”

Theron slashed down with one hand. “Lana, if you do this now you will destroy everything we have worked for.”

“Theron,” she spat. “If you weren’t so drunk on her you’d see that I’m trying to save it.”

Koth stalked over to plant himself at Lana’s side. Larr Gith, possible futures tumbling through her head, moved over as well. It helped that she was taller than Lana; she had full view. Theron took a step closer to Ruth and offered an arm. She shied away from it.

Tebbith buried his hands in his robe sleeves and closed his eyes. “If mercy is a flaw, then let us be flawed.” He glided over to Ruth’s other side.

Wynston held dead still.

“Lana,” he said. “Ruth. This does not have to be a fight. And we are all going to regret it if it becomes one.”

“She failed us,” said Lana. “She abandoned us twice when we were facing the fight of our lives.”

“You were there this time! She tried as hard as you did!”

“It doesn’t matter what I saw! He got away! She could have tried harder!”

“Lana, don’t do this!”

“Pick a side, Wynston!” She pressed her lips together and stood a little higher. “You know which one has a future for you.”

Koth, Larr Gith, and Lana stood opposite Ruth, Theron, and Tebbith. Wynston’s jaw clenched hard a few times in a row. He looked at Ruth the way a man looks at the last drink of the night – you know, the one that won’t be there long.

Then he turned and walked up to Lana.
Rather than standing with her he took her jaw with one long-fingered hand and kissed her. Gently, then deeply, and the entire frozen room heard the slight smacking. Larr Gith was about to complain when he stopped and moved his lips to Lana’s ear.

“Damn you for making me choose,” he whispered, and backed off, and went to stand by Ruth.
Seven Days to Empire

Chapter Summary

The command staff takes a vote. Ruth reacts. Tebbith and Koth discuss staying. Tebbith starts to make a home. Torian and Pierce talk about Calline. Wynston tries to cope. Droids meet. Theron tries to hold it together. (Lana, Wynston, Tebbith, Koth, Ruth, Theron, Larr Gith, Pierce, Torian, T7-01, T5-M7, Rylon Niral)

The color dropped from Lana’s features. “Wynston,” she said. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing, Lana. And you can always come back to me.”

“Not the best offer I’ve had.” She scowled at Ruth. “Holo me when you're ready to take advice from someone you haven't slept with.” She stalked past and down the spiral ramp.

Tebbith cleared his throat. “Lord Ruth, I...”

“I know, Tebbith.” Ruth looked tired. “She’s just trying to bother me.”

The brown-skinned Zabrak looked faintly green. “It's not that I wouldn't be...”

“I know, Tebbith. Be at ease. And...thank you, for your confidence.”

This seemed to return him to less distressing waters. “Sometimes all we can be is a light in dark places. The dark may seem bigger, but in my experience it's never become stronger.”

The life experience of a Temple Jedi. Force help them all.

“Ruth,” said Koth. “I’ll leave if you prefer.”

“No, not if you don’t want to. I don’t expect resignations here. You of all people, I want you up to speed if you want to stay. You’re free to work if you want or help me get our information flow back in order. Just...tell me next time there’s a problem.” Koth nodded sharply and left.

Which left Larr Gith alone with the loyalist contingent. Theron, looking haggard, Wynston, looking so relaxed Larr could feel the unbearable strain beneath, and... “Ruth,” she said. “No hard feelings?”

The Sith’s eyes went round, the artless blue looking a little washed out in the green-tinged sunlight. “You are the most civilized backstabber I’ve ever met,” she said, apparently sincerely. “I hope you’ll consider remaining. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ve come to value your advice as well as your skill.” She cleared her throat. “Evidently I have to say that more often.”

“One promotion for a Jedi? I’m already seeing the silver lining.”

Wynston’s look was absolute flame for a fraction of a second before he turned away. He sauntered out, head held high, trailing bleeding hearts in his wake.
“Wynston. Wynston!” Ruth rushed to follow the Chiss down the circular ramp. The Jedi were already down past him. “Hold on. Please.”

“You can’t help this time,” he said calmly without looking back at her. “Leave me alone, Ruth. Please. I’ll be ready to work in the morning.”

“I don’t care if you’re ready to work. I care if you’re okay.”

He stopped. He looked up. He smiled, a little bit, under tired eyes. “And that,” he said softly, “is why I did what I did.” He went on, and Ruth let him go.

Theron’s hand landed on her lower back. “You okay?”

“In a word? No. Can you catch up with Lana? She knows you better.”

“She won’t be listening. I’ll put out a word to traffic control, but I don’t think we have traffic control yet. Otherwise I think we give her time.”

“But where is she going to go? She can’t possibly be selling us out to someone more competent. She wouldn’t sell us out to someone less competent. She just…I can’t believe…ugh. I want privacy before I…I before I get upset. Let’s get Rylon and get back to my ship.”

Ordinarily Theron would have more comforting things to say at that point. But they were past ordinary.

Ruth had Rylon safely on board her ship and settled on the bridge before she headed to the bedroom, slumped against the wall, and started to cry.

“We almost lost it all,” she whispered.

“We lost a lot,” said Theron, and slid down to wrap an arm around her. “We’re going to rebuild, you hear me?”

“What if Lana was right? Am I going to get a second chance at him?”

“Signs point to guaranteed. But not today, okay? We’ve got a lot of building to do.”

Ruth cried anyway. Theron held her until the quieted, and held her a while after that, too.

*  

“Well, that was a total catastrophe,” said Koth. “Odessen doesn’t hold all my favorite memories, but…I wasn’t expecting this.”

“The evacuation went well,” said Tebbith.

“What set Scythia off? The one thing I hear about that woman is she’s reliable as long as you hold her deals.”

“You think she seriously interpreted a failure to kill Arcann as a betrayal?”

“I don’t know what other conclusion to draw. These people are not great at keeping friends.”

Tebbith stiffened. The ex-soldier was looking grim. “Does that mean you want to leave again?”
“I can hit the Eternal Fleet in the Gravestone with my crew. That’s been doing a lot more good than coordinating with the Outlander’s lot.”

“We need men of conscience. I think that abundantly describes you.”

Koth frowned at him. “Why do you care?”

“I want what’s best for the galaxy. Which is, until I hear otherwise, what’s best for the Alliance. Which is, unless I badly misunderstand, what’s best for the informed judgment of the Outlander and her friends. Zakuul has had no voice here since Lady Senya left. The Outlander needs those voices. Perhaps more importantly, I think she knows she needs them. Don’t leave.”

There. That was plenty of reasons that didn’t have to do with the way Koth walked or the sound of his voice. That was plenty of good, real reasons that he as a Jedi could talk about.

Koth’s brown eyes were impossible to read. “You’re serious.”

“I am. Please, Koth. Wherever we’re going. Come with us.”

The Human just grinned. “I have to be crazy to be considering this.”

“A little madness now and then is relished by the wisest men. Not my words, but I think I’ve begun to understand the intent. Please, let’s continue.”

*

This was more or less what Tebbith had in mind:

He said something witty and intelligent. Koth read it the right way, which was to walk up and touch Tebbith’s hand and then get shy. Tebbith touched his jaw, leaned down, and…

…well, it was supposed to be fairly self-explanatory once you reached it, right, otherwise people the galaxy over wouldn’t be doing it all the time? Tebbith took a shaky breath and respectfully changed the subject.

*

“Here it is,” said Tebbith. The tall Zabrak was beaming.

Ruth looked around. The brown stone room was built on a grand scale, just like most of the core of the converted temple on Ephel that was to serve as a home for the evacuees of Odessen. It had vast stone shelves carved all around and also into two long massive islands flanking the center of the room.

Two holocrons sat on the shelf nearest the door, glowing inoffensively.

“It’s big,” Ruth said politely.

“It is ideal! With time and work it will be a worthy resource for the Alliance.”

“I’m glad, Master Tebbith.”

He wasn’t done. “There is the slight problem of the tendency toward the Dark Side in this particular area. I’m studying ways to counteract that.”

She felt it on her, in her. Anyone with the faintest sensitivity would. “That wouldn’t make
people...do things out of character?"

The scholarly vagueness crystallized. “A woman trained to the Dark Side from birth knows perfectly well what she is doing, regardless of the atmosphere.”

“I understand.” It was nice to hear somebody acknowledge it. “Please, continue.”

“Well.” He pulled out his holo with one big hand and brought up a little static image of the planet and its biggest moon. “This planet is blessed with a large moon. I have taken the liberty of measuring and charting its predicted movements for the next few decades. There is going to be a total solar eclipse here in two weeks.”

Ruth looked blank, which was not diplomatic. What was so special about a solar eclipse? Given sublight engines you could put yourself in the shadow of anything in any solar system. There, eclipse. It's dark. Congratulations.

But Tebbith had his own way of processing things, and honestly, he was one of the friendlier faces left. “Really?” she managed. “Directly over here?”

“The path of totality comes right up the valley,” he said happily. “With your permission I hope to conduct a Force ritual to coincide.”

“Is it different with an eclipse?”

“Very much so. I expect a pooling of Dark Side energies.”

“And splashing in this...is that a Jedi thing?”

“The natural rhythms of the cosmos belong to all.” He let the holo fade. “It’s not just the Dark Side. It’s that it won’t stay gone when I scrub it. It has a...a will here. There's a creeping horror crawling straight up my library, Madam Outlander. And while under other circumstances I would be happy to study it, given our situation I do intend to remove it. I would be honored, and greatly helped, if you would join me.”

Ruth looked into his big brown eyes. They were sincere. “I'm not a ritualist, Tebbith. My training is in combat.”

“Nevertheless you are deeply attuned to the Force. I'm not sure I could cleanse the library myself, but with you and maybe a few friends I am confident we could make a decisive inroad.”

“Friends? Is this a vote of no confidence?”

His mouth fell open. “No, of course not!”

“Does Larr Gith know that?”

“I will make it clear. No one else here wants a change in leadership, Madam Outlander. But I look forward to seeing what you and I can do together.”

1: Torian and Calline

Calline was working with Torian. There were droids to be reconfigured to adapt to the new environment, and Calline liked working with droids. Torian worked beside her, friendly and
competent and eager to share his evaluation of the temple’s defenses, something Calline had casually surveyed herself.

Major Pierce interrupted them.

“More adventurers in store?” he said loudly. “Don’t think you’ll get one as exciting as mine any time soon.”

“Busy,” said Calline.

The bearded man smirked. “Busy later?”

“Yes.” She got up and dusted off her knees. It seemed like a good time to be somewhere else.

Torian tagged along at her elbow.

Pierce chuckled. “I hate to see you go but I love to watch you leave.”

Calline took her blaster and fired it backward over her shoulder. Pierce laughed.

Torian kept up, showing no surprise at her part of the exchange. “Are you flirting?”

“Long story,” grumbled Calline.

Torian dropped back beside Pierce, who was advancing with a cheerful step. “She said she’s not interested.”

“She hasn’t even tried me on for size.”

Torian scowled. “She is cuir’ace. Battle-born. It is a rank of great honor among the Mando’ade. And it means she takes no partner.”

He scowled right back. “Just when I think you Mandalorians make sense…” He stuck out his chin and stalked off.

Calline didn’t regret his departure. She did, however, have a question on language. “I thought the saying was ‘battle-wed.’”

“Why should you have to be wed to be left alone?”

“Torian…” She took a deep breath and let it out. It traced a smile on the way. “You are my best friend.”

He smiled back brilliantly. “My honor, Champion.”

2: Wynston

One night Wynston could deal with. In theory he could deal with many, many more. But now that the end state was alone…

He hadn’t expected Lana to turn on Ruth. Then again, she hadn’t expected Lana to be stuck behind an impossible ultimatum with the fate of Odessen in the balance. Why hadn’t he seen that fault line? He spent his day assisting the configuration of the temple’s network and archives. The moment the Alliance came up with a field assignment he took it.

He took his personal ship out, giving the shambles of traffic control a miss and charting his own course into orbit. He had a world in mind, a place where a few diplomatic words might do a lot of
good. His briefing was incomplete; a lot of operatives were in flux while Ephel was being rebuilt. He could operate on less than complete certainty, though. A person learned to do that, or went mad.

He was received as a friend. The Outlander’s name was good for that much. He talked. He charmed. He bargained. He counted the hours until he could go down to the cantina in the lower levels of the government square.

Then he did.

The place was airy and classy, the music live and understated, the lighting low, the bar wonderfully, deliriously extensive. He had a drink and thought about the day. He had a drink and thought about Lana not being here. He started a drink, caught himself, and adjusted the pace. The drink tasted terrible once he took a second to think about it. He sipped it anyway. “Regrettable cocktails” would be a chapter title in his autobiography.

This was him. This was his doing. This was his world. This was his…

“Credit for your thoughts,” said the Rattataki.

He had avoided those for a long time, but she was petite, soft-featured, and dressed in something approaching businesswear. You couldn’t get much more different than that. Her markings were velvety purple-black in stripes down her face and back over her ears. She sounded local. Very nice.

He signaled the bartender. “I was just thinking,” he said, “that if I have to deliver one more cargo to one more random-ass planet without R&R between I think I’ll go insane. Got time to dissuade me?”

“One step at a time, stranger.”

“Alexis.” He offered his hand. “You wouldn’t like trying to pronounce my given name.”

She squeezed and didn’t let go right away. “Must make you good at parties.”

“Name first or I’ll just convince myself I made this conversation up.”

She was in town for other business; she wasn’t selling it. Fifteen years ago he would’ve killed to bump into people like her at every port. Apparently fifteen years ago he had been a much more boring-looking man. This woman was acting purely on looks and on whatever the hell vibe he was putting out now. Tragedy, he thought grimly. Noble bloody tragedy.

He finished his drink, smiled, lied, and started another.

*3: Ruth and Theron

“The Gravestone’s gone,” said Ruth.

“What?” said Theron.

“Koth took it on patrol. I think he’s technically still affiliated with us? It’s not like he gave me a choice. I could have done…”

Theron shifted behind Ruth. It was dead dark in their quarters on the ship and she could feel him moving up to curl his long athletic body behind hers. “It’s okay. He’ll come back. He always comes back.”
“Next week, he says. But...he and Lana both know enough to ruin us ten times over. Theron, they’re going to come after us.”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“If it were just me I wouldn’t worry, but I can’t protect you and Rylon 24/7. I would give anything, but I can’t.”

“There’s kind of a large step between disagreeing with your leadership style and murdering your loved ones.”

“You only say that because you’re from the Republic.” Ruth tensed up and Theron tensed right with her. “I did it wrong. All of it. This whole time I just assumed, I took what I wanted and figured I was entitled to it because of who I am. My whole life. I took. I was the leader because I said so. And somebody finally stood up to say I’m doing it wrong, and you know what? She’s right. She wouldn’t rip this thing apart unless she knew she was right.”

“You can’t fight this now. Tomorrow you’ll fight some things you can. But not right now.”

“What if she was right? What if I could’ve killed him in time?”

“I have never in my life seen you take a half measure. You did all you could. The rest of it is Scythia’s fault.”

“But I’m the one presiding over the wreckage.”

“You’re the most charming person we could put on the job.”

“Ha. Ha.”

“What was that?”

“Me acknowledging that your terrible joke was a genuine effort to make me feel better.”

“Aw.” He tucked her more firmly into his arms. “Thanks.”

“I should have killed him. I should have killed him!”

“Would you listen to yourself? Even if he was the bad guy, beating yourself up for completing a murder is not called for.”

“I could have fixed this.”

“You are fixing it, babe. A step at a time.”

Ruth’s thoughts continued racing in circles. She tried to relax and didn’t do a very good job. Minutes later she sighed.

Theron’s hands slid. “Not tired yet?”

“No,” she said glumly.

“But you’ll be okay?”

“Yes,” she guessed.
“Okay.” He nuzzled her neck, then kissed it lightly. He ran a hand to her hip and kissed her ear. Warmth spread from his touch as though from small and manageable home hearths.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

He drew down her strap to nuzzle her shoulder. “Taking.”

4: Rylon

“Mom, where’s Wynston?” said Rylon.

“I don’t know.” Mom looked worse with every passing day. The smudges under her eyes were bigger than the eyes themselves and her hair had started showing flyaways around the edges. “Can you go to the auditorium and get back to class?”

“It’s time for…”

Someone else ran up. “Outlander. I think you need to see this.”

Ruth turned, ruffled Rylon’s hair, and then bolted.

He looked down the long hallway. People were everywhere, measuring, carrying, installing, arranging, trying to turn this creepy dead temple into the kind of city center Odessen had been.

He walked. Then he started running.

The stairs were wide ripples down from the entrance and the gorge spread out ahead. A stream fell white and foaming from beside the temple and widened into a river of sorts. The waterfall on Odessen had been small and tame by comparison.

There were big biting insects but Rylon didn’t care. He ran down to the dark green grove and hopped up on a mossy branch that arched over the burbling stream. This place was deeper than Odessen in a way Rylon couldn’t quite describe. His meditations here had been troubled with shadows. Now he just studied the leaves and let the time pass. He wasn’t ready to return to class.

Today he was supposed to take a call from his father. But nobody was there to supervise him. He feared irritating his mother while she was so much on edge. Besides, maybe nobody wanted him to find out they had moved.

He climbed out of sight. It wasn’t like anybody would miss him.

5: Tebbith and Larr Gith

“Master Larr.” Tebbith nodded over his food tray. The food in this new settlement was occasion for meditations on patience. That sort of thing kept one healthy. The meditation, not the food.

“Teb.” The younger Jedi tossed her head, sending her looped-up golden ponytail dancing. He had had extensive practice in not noticing that kind of thing in the people around him. “How’s your library?” she said breezily.

“I saved twelve holocrons.” And would have saved more, were the evacuation of Odessen not so urgent. Leaving the library at Odessen had been the second hardest parting of his adult life. “The rest, we will build and reacquire.”

“I would say some might’ve survived Odessen, but I’m pretty sure subatomic particles didn’t
survive Odessen.”

“And you? There’s been nothing untoward with the Outlander, has there?”

“Oh, no. Have you seen what she’s had to deal with since we got here? Let her have her job. I’m busy keeping the interior decorating in this place tolerable. – You! Get a light fixture that isn’t the color of puke! What is this, Hutta?”

Tebbith nodded judiciously. “Indispensable as usual, Master Larr.”

She made a pink little pout. “Is that sarcasm?”

“I don’t know, it was a very offensive color. Though, Zabrak vomit is blue.” He cracked a smile. He did that from time to time. It kept people from figuring out the Barsen’thor too well. Larr just looked suspicious.

Ephel went on. Tebbith ate mindfully and gently urged a passing builder to defer to Master Larr Gith's wishes before setting anything in stone.

6: T7-01 and T5-M7

The ship zoomed in. T5-M7 rolled up to offer assistance.

She was surprised to find a shiny orange astromech rolling out.

<T7-01 = most veteran droid in Alliance // T7 + Jedi Larr Gith = heroes // T7 = returning from deep space recon>

<T5 = fully capable of bad language>

T7’s head whirled again. <T5 = fully capable of bad language>

T7-01 beeped scornfully. <T5 = needs maintenance>

<Armored lady = all maintenance necessary // language libraries = sufficient>

<Organics != understand nonstandard library // T5 = probably in trouble>

<Vacuum zap?>

<Red fiddly head-tails.>

T5 spun her battered green head unit. <T7 = understand // T5 = understand // Armored lady = understand // !Problem>

T7 rolled halfway around her. <Ephel = new // landing pad = new // why?>

<Explanation = necessary // Shouting = much // You = know Dark Council?>
T7 beeped wildly. T5 took that as confirmation, and started rolling with her new companion toward the old temple.

7: Theron

“Where’s the Outlander?”

“On leave,” said Theron. She was getting a shower, a real one back at the ship. Stars knew it was the only time she’d taken for herself in the past week.

Well, apart from that night. It was so rare for her to let him take the lead. It was...not something he could think about right then.

“Right,” said the foreman. “So we’ve looked at the feasibility of detoniting out that cliff face on that plateau behind the temple as a hangar area. It doesn’t look good…”

“...where are we going to get the fuel rods for this?...”

“Listen, I’ve busted my ass for this Alliance and the least they can do is…”

“The lights aren’t working in the dormitories. It’s not exactly friendly…”

“We don’t have enough supplies and we can’t buy them with friendly faces alone…”

“When do we get private rooms again?”

“When do we…” “When do we…” “When do we…?”

Theron answered. He adjudicated. He made decisions. He delegated other decisions. The stream of people was endless, and while he would do anything to take a little strain off Ruth’s shoulders, he was starting to wonder about his own. He half wanted something to blow up just so he had a clear and manageable problem.

Tomorrow they would just have to go negotiate with the Sith Empress. He couldn’t wait.
An Alliance With the Empire

Chapter Summary

Wynston, Theron, and Ruth go to discuss galactic matters with Empress Acina. An emergency landing is made. Lana makes an offer to Darth Scythia.

Sorry for the rush job, I didn't get a chance to review this very well.

Wynston was sober and the flask in his boot was tiny. These people would drop the work that mattered and virtue him to death if he showed up impaired. Besides, stopping was no big deal. He’d stopped himself on plenty of occasions. A very stressful event was an understandable time to dip back for support, just a little.

“Wynston! Where have you been?” Ruth looked like she’d been suspended sleepless from a cliff for a week and then dropped.

He’d had a similar experience once, not figuratively. It wasn’t fun. “Something came up in the Sullust sector. I intervened. Mission accomplished: we have one more friend.”

Her strain lessened a tiny bit. “Thank you. But we need you here more.”

How she had coped with the first few days after Lana’s departure he didn’t know and frankly hadn’t been in a position to care. He’d been too busy trying to numb his own heart. Well, forward was the only way to go. “I wanted to be here for the summit with Acina on Dromund Kaas.”

“I was hoping you would stay here. Hold down the fort?”

“Theron’s going, yes?”

“Yes, of course.”

“If the SIS is there Imperial Intelligence should be there, too. You might still get some use out of Cipher Nine.”

Ruth didn’t look convinced, but he’d swayed her on less than full confidence before. “I’m just afraid of leaving Larr Gith alone,” she said. “And I hate that I have to think like this.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Wynston said quietly. “Larr by herself couldn’t coup her way out of a flimsy bag.”

“Talk to Tebbith,” said Theron. “He's sharper than he pretends. And for what it’s worth, have Calline do guard duty in ops. Nobody can miss that.”

Ruth looked at Theron and Wynston. “There it is, then,” she said. “My ship is fueled. We’ll get moving at 1100 sharp.”

Theron, damnably enough, was only half listening to Ruth. He was instead looking at Wynston. “You going to be all right?” he said quietly.
“Absolutely.” He could fit in some pregaming while the other two were distracted. Just a little. A very stressful event was an understandable time to dip back for support.

Just him standing there, empty-handed and exhausted, unable to lessen his organization’s burdens or be the exemplar they expected him to be. No, he would never let anyone see him like this.

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It was a strange ship. Ruth’s vessel, the Scorned, had been lost in that faraway battle when Darth Marr was killed and Ruth was imprisoned in carbonite. Every ship since then had been strange to her.

But her friends were on this one, so it was good enough.

Right now that was Theron and Wynston. Ruth trod carefully. She avoided the little touches, the conscious nearness while Wynston was in the room. He’d just lost a lover that anyone could see had meant the galaxy to him. The least she could do was not rub her own happiness in his face.

(In the interest of discretion, she took the corusca-gem ring off her finger and tucked it in her pocket. The Empire would know soon enough, just not during delicate negotiations on a planet where everybody wanted an advantage against her. Theron had volunteered to spend the rest of his life with a target painted on his forehead. He didn’t have to start today.)

(He seemed to understand.)

She did the talking to get them into the Dromund Kaas spaceport. She emphasized her accent and even put on a little of the old command tone. She was a Sith coming home to treat with her equals. A private vehicle was waiting at the spaceport. Ruth could tell it was expensive because the droid driver didn’t natter at them. Wynston gave it a businesslike once-over and nodded to approve Ruth and Theron’s entry. The three of them flew.

The Dromund Kaas jungle was dark at this hour; they’d flown most of yesterday and were coming in now early in the morning. The leaves waved and lashed under the punishing rain. Things moved down there. Monsters, maybe, some of them sentient. Growing up she had had a walled garden to the west, a safe place of lilies and splashy ponds. She hadn’t realized the differences when she first blundered into the world.

That home was closed up now, traps left in place. Maybe if this went well Ruth could clean the place up again. Maybe Theron wouldn’t mind being there from time to time. Maybe some new child could play in the garden and keep illusions for just a while longer.

She shook her head, hard, and looked around. “You said something?”

Theron smiled the galaxy-is-okay smile at her. “I was just admiring the city. How far down do those buildings go?”

Wynston chuckled. “A long way. Stay on the walkways while you’re here.”

For they were there now: this abrupt defiance of the wearing storms. Kaas City, sparkling with monuments and united in one grand disdain for the ravages of wind, gravity, and time. The high grey towers braved ceaseless lightning and people on the ground scurried under bubble projectors, cloth umbrellas, or in some cases servant-carried canopies. Ruth prayed nobody killed anybody while Theron was looking. She hadn’t expected to show him her home planet like this.

“The Spires of Victory,” said Ruth. “That was for…”
“The Sacking of Coruscant,” Wynston supplied. “We were very happy about that one.”

“You, too?” Theron said archly.

“I was a faithful operative of Imperial Intelligence. Their victories against the weak and gullible Republic delighted me.”

Theron laughed nervously. “Yeah. So the Dark Council? They’re all in that building?”

“Yes,” said Ruth, “they’re in the Citadel when they’re not on Korriban. The chambers here are a little less grand but you can’t argue with the location.”

Theron took in the stormy scene. “I can see that.”

But their vehicle didn’t go to the Citadel. It cut down below top Kaas City and into the building-stabbed middle. It finally reached a little landing pad that had a shuttle, a blank spot, and one woman.

Ruth led the way out. “Empress.”

Acina nodded regally. She was wearing elaborate robes and a silvery headpiece that seemed to shine brighter than the ambient light. “Outlander.”

“I don’t believe you’ve met my other associates,” said Ruth. “Theron Shan and Wynston.”

“SIS and Imperial Intelligence,” Acina said coolly. “These times make strange bedfellows.”

“They fight the Eternal Empire,” said Ruth. “Nothing is too strange for that.”

“I find myself in agreement. I would like to continue this conversation on my personal shuttle. Just the two of us, speaking freely.”

Ruth focused on not looking at her advisors. This was one of those times where collusion meant weakness meant death. “With weapons, Empress?”

“Of course with weapons. I wouldn’t strip my guests before sitting down with them to dinner. I am no match for you in combat, and we are not going to a manned facility. Does that satisfy you?”

“Facility with droids?”

“No. We’ll go…here. There. In a circle. The point is to talk alone, the route will be whatever supports that.”

Ruth’s gut screamed at her. Unexpected changes in terms from high-ranking Sith…the only point in its favor was that Acina would be right there with her. Ruth nodded and left her chin high.

Acina turned to the others. “There is a private facility with holocomms just down the path from here. Make yourselves at home. I expect no more than six hours. We will of course be in contact with any changes.”

“Okay,” said Theron, looking at Ruth.

“Very well,” said Wynston, looking at Acina.

Ruth boarded the shuttle with Acina, staying close. No Sith who had made it this far would sacrifice herself to take down someone who still had the chance to be an ally. Regardless: the
shuttle was Imperial, functional, badly lit, though most of the cockpit was viewport so she could see how bad visibility was outside. She jumped when it rose into their air. “Automatic?” she said sheepishly.

“I didn’t want more witnesses. Wrath…”

“Outlander. Please.”

“Very well. Outlander.” Acina was a decade or two older than Ruth, nearly the same height, with much fuller hair and much more sophisticated accessories. Right now her red eyes were all business. “I’m relieved you’re considering an alliance with the Empire. There remain Sith who do not approve of the alliance I offer. They hold tight to the old ways. But to stop Vaylin, we must work together. We both know there is only one path to victory. You want to seize the Eternal Throne. And I will help you.”

Ruth reviewed that entire speech and didn’t think it added up. “You don’t want it yourself?”

“I am focused on the survival of my people.”

“Are you suggesting one cannot hold the throne and protect one’s people at the same time?” It was chilling. It was plausible.

“Lord Outlander. Surely you already know the answer.”

Ruth swallowed and turned away. The jungle waved and rustled under the drumming of the rain. Throne or people. Well, Ruth had been vigorously defending her claim to one of those things…

Acina cleared her throat. “Unchecked, Vaylin will grind us into dust. I am not powerful enough to stop her. You are, with my help.”

“I could test you,” Ruth said dazedly. “I could take out my sabers and fight you to a standstill or worse. Would you respect me more then?”

“What you have built is more than two lightsabers. We all recognize that.”

“How far we have come from the standards of ordinary Sith.”

“I can admire power. I can no longer afford to worship it.”

“I’m a little surprised you’re willing to back me without proof against Vaylin. She’s infamous. I’m merely famous.”

“You’re the best chance we have. If we…agree, on that, I see no need to hurry on to terms. We have a few hours. Have you had news of Dromund Kaas since your awakening on Zakuul?”

“Spy reports. Hints from Lana.”

“I can tell you how power has changed. I can tell you how the streets have changed. I can tell you how Vowrawn died.”

Yes, she thought, yes please. This had been her home once. Ruth settled in a chair and twisted sideways to keep her view of her companion. “Yes,” she said. “Tell me everything.”

---

Lana landed in the Dromund Kaas spaceport and drove as fast as practical into the city. Business in
Dromund Kaas was a natural Sith thing. Lana took a taxi to the high tower and entered on the ground floor. It was built on grand scale with lavish green and black décor. Lana wondered whether that was the owner’s request or an attempt by the decorator to curry favor. The elevator wouldn’t go to the level she had in mind. She took it up to the level below and then took the stairs.

She paused in the cramped grey stairwell with its blotchy white light fixtures and took a deep breath, listening at the high narrow door. There was no hint of habitation. She pushed the door open a tiny bit and released a mouse droid, then activated her holo to see what it was seeing.

It zipped around, as mouse droids do, navigating the yawning doorways and dusty carpets of the level. Only one door was closed. Lana tucked the droid back in the stairwell, drew her lightsaber, and walked in.

There was no alarm. There was no resistance. The casual observer would think this place had been deserted for months or years. Lana had not been a casual observer in a very, very long time.

She opened the door.

White piping brought up a soft radiance on the carpet around the vast black desk. The desk was empty. The shelves on three sides stayed in shadow. There was nothing on them. The window on the fourth wall looked out over the entry to the Citadel. That was a nice illusion of power. Lana couldn’t fault the owner’s taste.

She leaned down, peering, to see the outline of a small heel in the carpet. It seemed careless. It seemed careless, which meant it really, really wasn’t.

She activated her saber and spun to lock it against a long black blade.

Khem Val in the shadows was awe-inspiring. Lana stepped in and swung again. Scythia’s monster was easily as tall as a Wookiee and was possessed of more muscle, straining under the uneven crystal-studded skin. He blocked her swing and shifted his considerable weight to kick at her. She backed up and waited for him to close to stabbing range.

<You came alone? You disappoint me, little Sith.>

“I wanted first crack,” said Lana, because that sounded better than “All my friends ran off with a terminally charitable half-Sith who’s going to get them all killed.” She flurried at Khem Val, singeing a dark cut into his wrist before he could block the last blow.

<Did your pathetic general betray you? My master predicted this.>

“Your master. Are you willing to die for her?”

<My allegiance to her is complete.>

“As it was to Tulak Hord.”

<You know me, little Sith?>

“I think I understand you very well.” Ah, to be someone’s trained monster. She never had, and she never would be. Lana Beniko was more than that. “You’re going to do nicely.”

It was not a creative fight. Khem Val was a superb swordsman and with every swing the light in the room seemed to die a little. Lana was continuously and unremittingly competent while they battled back and forth between the desk and the window. There was nothing to throw. There was
nothing to swing off. Just black and red, slashing and burning, a duel that was starting to make Lana feel really alive.

Khem Val growled. His off hand thrust toward her and gripped the air. Something thin and cold inside her loosened and streamed. It was strange, yes, but oddly right. It seemed perfectly logical to just let that drain.

His eyes narrowed at her. She thought, vaguely, how nice it would be to shrug everything off for just a moment. To let the Force ebb, quietly, not so bad.

*You are more than this.*

She snarled and swung harder. Khem Val blocked. *<You burn,>* he said. *<That which burns is consumed. I am only the instrument. Permit this, and all else is simple.>*

She flurried and pressed. The tug vanished from her heart and the cold stopped flowing. “Is that why your master keeps you around?” she strained. “To make sure death is matched with despair?”

*<You understand.>* Khem crossed his blade against hers, forced hers aside, and leaned in.

Her Force shove pushed him off balance. She raced up to set her lightsaber’s tip at his throat.

*<Is this how you curry favor with my master, little Sith?>* 

“Yes, actually. It is.”

*<And must I die for your point?>*

“Like I ought to die for yours? Believe me,” said Lana, “I’ve been looking forward to this.” Because sometimes the kill was just the right thing to do, regardless of the orders. The Shadow Killer surged. Lana followed. She pierced his throat from side to side and pulled a scorched grin out on her withdrawing swing.

Here she was. A place and time where killing was unambiguously called for. She had to look to the future. No matter what heart’s blood was running down the past.

There was a holo under the desk, Lana hit the only button on it. Thirty seconds later Darth Scythia appeared, all green robes and high black hair.

“Oh, my,” she said. “You were high up the probability list. What can Darth Scythia do for you, brave Lord Beniko?”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I despise your methods, and if anyone else shared both my goals and my problem-solving flexibility you can believe I would go to them first. But you want Arcann removed. So do I. You want Vaylin removed. So do I.” Lana folded her arms, leaving her artificial silver hand in view, and stared. “I think we can do business.”

“Business? No noble talk of common ideals?”

As if there could be common ideal with the person who had leveled Odessen. “Transactions, Scythia. Your raison d’être.”

“Well. What do you bring to this deal?”

“Well, you’re going to need a new bodyguard.”
Scythia’s faint smile vanished. Her eyes widened. “Khem Val?”

“I’m serious.” And it was a gift, in a way, to old friends, because only Ruth Niral at full power with advance warning could realistically do what Lana had just done for free. “I don’t believe it’s a dealbreaker.”

“No,” said Scythia, green eyes sparkling. “It isn’t.”

*

Hours passed in conversation, partly about the city, partly about the future of an alliance Ruth couldn’t openly describe and an Empire Acina couldn’t control without help. It was, in a curious way, staggeringly productive. Ruth was waiting for the trap, but the trap kept not coming.

Until it did.

Later she would realize that the searing sense of wrongness was missiles from the surface. Acina seemed to feel it at the same time. She darted to the controls.

“Cut left,” said Ruth.

“What?” said Acina.

“Wyook,” said the punctured metal of the shuttle’s side. Something else pounded the engine seconds later.

“Strap in,” yelled Ruth.

“There’s a canyon up there,” yelled Acina. “We’re dead if we stay.”

There was no time. Ruth kicked the shuttle’s panel free, revealing a sickening torrent of storm-wild jungle below. She and Acina nodded at one another, then separated and leaped. She focused hard to push matter away from her as she fell. The rain spattered around a silvery-shadow egg with Ruth at the center as she spread her arms and legs and fell…and fell…

The tree ripped her leg, and she twisted, screamed, and fell in the darkness. The last impact flattened her full weight. Her sense of the Force was too much soaked in blood to stop it.

Moments or hours later she looked around dizzily. She was some meters away from the offending tree. The grey-green canopy stifled here but rain was oozing through and falling in heavy dollops. The only light was from her holo, which had assumed that the impact meant she wanted to turn it on.

She did. It crackled and fuzzed and refused to resolve to anything. Broken, or jammed? It was hard to think through the pain.

“Acina,” she yelled. “Acina!”

Somewhere among the trees a red lightsaber activated, arced in a twirling throw, and fell to ground. Ruth noted the direction and tried to get up. Her leg sliced agony up and down its length. She limped to the tree – grabbing at hanging vegetation to take her weight on every other step – and ripped off a branch. She fumbled and cut the first one in half. More carefully, focusing through her trembling arms, she cut off another branch and split its top. With that crutch he made her way over to Acina.
The woman was lying twisted on the ground. “Outlander,” she mumbled. “I’m not going to last.”

Ruth activated her saber for the light and wished she hadn’t. Acina’s entire front had been slashed by her fall.

“When free,” muttered Ruth. She took Acina’s holo and tried it, to no better result. She took her jacket off and, with some careful lightsaber work, cut strips out to bind around the fallen Empress. That done, her shoulders bare to the stinging rain, she looked around. “This isn’t going to be friendly to people like us any time soon.”

“Agreed. Is there anywhere you can go?”

“I thought there was a clearing we passed over. It might be a place to try to make a signal. Smoke, or something.”

“Have you ever tried to light a fire with a lightsaber?”

“No. How hard can it be?”

Acina coughed. “I’m afraid I can’t move.”

“I’ll take you.”

“The Wrath would never invest that effort in the dying.”

“The Wrath is dead, Acina. If we establish nothing else in this trip, let it be that.” She went to get two long sticks and a huge, sturdy leaf. It wouldn’t be fun. But it would get her places.
Theron and Wynston seek Ruth's downed shuttle while discussing conspiracy theories and relationship histories. Rylon hears his mother is missing. Ruth tries making a signal. Saresh offers her condolences to Theron. (Theron, Wynston, Rylon Niral, Pierce, Quinn, Ruth, Saresh, Acina)

A man ran into the chamber where Wynston and Theron were doing homework and shoring up local connections. “Sirs. I bring bad news. The Empress. Her shuttle has stopped responding.”

Wynston looked up. “What do you mean, stopped responding?”

“The locator beacon is completely failing to transmit. That would only happen if the shuttle were pulverized. There’s been a storm out there, and, well, I’m…I’m sorry.”

There was a quiet moment.

“Theron,” said Wynston. “With me.”

“I’ll call Tebbith on the way,” said Theron. “It’ll take him a while to get here, but if anybody can Force sense powerful Sith it’d be him.”

Wynston nodded curtly. “Do so.”

He led Theron up toward Imperial Intelligence and reflected wryly that he never expected to conduct an unbound SIS agent here. Theron didn’t seem to be in fit condition to take notes on the enemy fortress. Wynston didn’t know the new Keeper and he didn’t care to, but bluffing and some small user overrides did wonders.

The locator beacon transmitted at a delay; an unwanted listener could tell where the shuttle had been ten minutes ago, but would never get up-to-the-moment information. Then again one destroyed in a crash would fail to update, too. It was little to go on.

“Last known locator reading locked in,” said Wynston, flicking a few shuttle controls. “Their shuttle took a fairly stable path, we’ll just project from there.”

The rain was thickening. “There's our storm,” he said.

Theron peered out the viewport. “How is it different from what we came in through?”

“It's more violent. You'll see.” The shuttle shuddered despite Wynston's best efforts. This was not going to be an easy ride.

Well, obviously.

[Theron]

“Wynston?” said Theron. He was at a console looking through readings.
A few minutes later Wynston, secure in the pilot’s seat, stirred. “Yes?”

A few minutes later Theron managed to drag out more words. “You’ve known her a long time.”

The jungle whispered below. No one listened to the clamor of the thunder.

“Years,” said Wynston. “Even with the interruption.”

“You know, I couldn't figure you when she brought you to Odessen. You obviously were very close, but you weren't doing anything about it.”

“She has walked through darkness and flame and really, really big bugs at my side, for no reason other than that I asked. I do care for her, Theron. But we know each other too well. It would never work.”

“So…Lana didn’t know you too well?”

There was nothing on the horizon but more clouds and more lightning.

“Lana was always different.”

“I’m sorry.”

Wynston shrugged. “There are two schools of thought in the intelligence community about relationships. One is transactional, I build value, I expend influence. The other is a matter of manipulating perspective. If I make you believe I am trustworthy, I get the benefits of trust - but change the belief and the benefits evaporate, and all the level of previous effort does is tweak the rapidity of that evaporation. If I make you believe I'm a good man, strong, selfless...then it's true until I prove it's not. Whether that proof is a whisper in the ear or a blazing proclamation. And when I do prove it's not, all prior influence goes out the airlock. I proved something last week, Theron.” Wynston took a deep breath. “If I lose both of them now…”

“We won’t.”

“We’ve got nobody left to lie to. You don’t have to try me.”

“That was pretty much exactly the wrong thing to say.”

“Ah. I apologize.”

Lightning struck near and the forest seemed darker after.

“Although,” said Theron.

“What’s that?”

“With Ruth. I wasn't sure when you originally showed up, whether you were going to...I mean, it'd ease my mind that she likes men, because she'd given zero indication before that, but it'd block me for good.”

“I never meant to threaten you.”

“I got that. You were making a point of being nonthreatening.”

“Twenty years ago I would have been insulted.”
Theron looked over. Wynston was pale blue, with finely carved features bordering on the pretty, oft-hooded red eyes, and an air of lazy control. His dark blue hair was side parted and immaculately combed, a state he maintained during even emergencies. Theron was aware he’d had some reconstructive surgery about a scar, so who knew what he would’ve looked like without that? “Exactly how old are you?”

He took it in stride. “I walked into Imperial Intelligence almost twenty-eight years ago.”

Imperials, he thought wryly. “That’s not what I asked.”

Wynston grinned. “Don’t you count your age from when your life began?”

There were long silences while they flew. There was nothing to see in the jungle. There was nothing to see in the sky. There was only a marker on the map, blinking, and they had to reach it before it faded.

Theron cleared his throat. “Wynston, I...”

“Yes?”

“Yesterday I was neck deep in complaints and I thought, just for a second, I wish something would blow up so I'd have a manageable problem.”

Wynston cast him a look. “That has nothing to do with what just happened,” he said sincerely.

“It feels like it does. What if...what if she actually...?”

“If it's happened, we'll have to mourn some other time. The Alliance will require short-term care. You could take that role.”

“Me? Without her? No, thanks. It'd be too much like wearing her skin. You could, though. Lana might come back. She has confidence in you.” In fact it might be the only thing that would get her back.

Wynston was silent for a minute or more. “There's something you should know that I haven't mentioned. I separated from Imperial Intelligence nearly ten years ago. I was gathering my own resources for a spy and intervention agency independent of the Empire. It...went wrong. Sith infighting ripped it away in pieces. I ended up alone and friendless in the middle of a civil war. That's what Ruth rescued me from. I was ready to run the galaxy. If she did so so I could take up the charge one more time...maybe that's the best thing to do. I can't lead with her conviction or her personal touch and it's obvious I can't lead with her power. But I will do what needs doing. And yes, I do expect Lana will like that.”

“Don't. You sound bitter.”

“I'm perturbed.” They flew a while longer. Wind buffeted the shuttle and Wynston bared his teeth as he fought them back to a steady course. The sight had an odd pathos to it. “How did we get here, Theron? You and I are secret agents. You know we're not supposed to attach. We're supposed to stay impartial.”

“Disinterested.”

“Free of the manipulations we put on others.”

“Professional.”
“Cynical.”

“Free.” Theron sighed. “Not at this price. Not if it means losing Ruth and Lana.”


“I never thanked you,” said Wynston.

“Oh, for what?”

“Making Ruth smile again. She draws from those near her. When she drove away Vette and Jaesa and me those years ago, she became a monster. But when she met you you found something in her.”

Theron nodded. “You ground Lana. She spends so much time with her head in the clouds trying to uncover the inner workings of the galaxy...sometimes I think she needs the reminder that she's a person and not an interrogation probe.”

“What a person,” whispered Wynston. “Did you ever...?”

“Oh, no. Never even tilted in that direction.” He quirked his eyebrows. “Just how long were you and Ruth involved?”

“Days.”

He sat up straighter. “Really? I just assumed, the way you two work together...”

“We came to respect one another through work and almost entirely platonic dinner conversations. But the romantic phase was brief; her eyes were elsewhere. I was actually a proper cad back then. She was wide-eyed and available. Which admittedly didn't faze me.”

“You guys always make it sound like I'm the first adult relationship she ever had.”

“Effectively you were. She was eighteen when she left Korriban. She had a fling with me and a long, brutally effective con with her former husband. I like to think mine was the more equitable involvement, but it wasn't formal and it wasn't for long.”

“It was hard to see at first, but she was afraid of me. When we were starting. She really believed I could hurt her.”

“She was afraid of being punished for her trust. Meaning she was a well-adjusted Sith.”

“She's not a Sith, not really.”

“She'll argue that point with you. I don't recommend bringing it up.”

“Why?”

“She may be a very bad Sith, but its tenets are important to her. She just keeps muddying it with things about honor and kindness. Passion isn't just rage. If she believes that enough maybe it'll be true.”

Theron frowned. “Maybe it's always been true.” And a guy like Wynston should know it.

“You know what has driven my Imperial world in my nearly thirty years in Imperial Intelligence under Sith supervision? Anger. Sadism. Revenge. Paranoia. One-upmanship. These things make
the world go 'round. So what kind of idiot injects love?”

Oh. The song of the Empire, with one verse just for him. “My girl,” he whispered.

“That's why I fight for her. That's why I won't accept that something so offensively banal as a shuttle accident can really...cause a problem.”

The last beacon had been three hours ago. They had about three hours left. The shuttle rockered and bucked. Wynston kept rigid control.

“How long did you know Lana before I did?” he said.

“Ten, twelve months?” said Theron. “We'd done some favors before I even realized she was advising the Dark Council. We ended up chasing the Revanites, and, well.”

“That's very impersonal.”

“Lana is my friend. It kills me that we had to do this, that she felt like she had to walk away from the Alliance.”

“I thought she could look past losing her hand. Anything for the cause. I think in the end she just didn't want to be the only one bleeding. To see Ruth healthy and continuing to chase happy endings for people who aren't doing us any favors...” The Chiss shook his head. “I never thought she would leave us. Then again I never thought she would be put behind an impossible ultimatum with the fate of Odessen at stake. One surprise leads to another.”

“It was a stupid move.”

“I understand her frustration with Ruth's insistence on protecting things people love while bigger issues are at stake.”

“No, it was a stupid move to leave you. Does she really think she's going to do better?”

The corner of Wynston’s mouth crept up. “Color me flattered but a little unclear on where the vote of confidence comes from.”

“From seeing you together. That’s all.”

Wynston nodded. “Anyway. We need to talk current events.”

“Uh, like right right now current?”

“Yes. That shuttle going down wasn’t an accident and I’m not even convinced Acina was in on it. We’ll have to see whether she survived.”

“If it wasn’t her, then whoever did this targeted the Empire and the Alliance. There's a small chance that Acina arranged it all and brought a parachute. But if they were both targets?”

“It could be anyone on the Dark Council. Plenty of them would oppose an alliance with the, er, Alliance. I think Ravage is the foremost contender. He doesn't feel bound by Sith notions of courtesy. A definite candidate. There's one.”

“Scythia?”

“We concluded our business with her. Not in our favor, but she considers it a done deal. It'd be a waste of resources to break that arrangement now.”
“Sick, but characteristic. Okay. Vaylin isn't a tactical-strike kind of person. She would bomb
down Kaas City to rubble rather than inconveniencing one lousy shuttle in the middle of a civilized
conversation. And the cartels aren't known for committing suicide.”

“That leaves the Republic.”

Theron fought the chill in his spine. “That leaves the Republic.”

“Assume no cabal in the Senate could arrange something of this scale, and assume the newest
Chancellor hasn't had time to settle in. How well do you know Chancellor Saresh?”

“Not well. She wouldn't be where she is without some serious savvy, though.”

“Savvy and assassins, everything one needs to thrive in this life. Ravage always admired the Wrath.
I don't think he would take her down without a talk.”

“Is that where the shuttle was going? For a talk?”

“We find out when we get there. No Ravage chateau? Then Saresh owes us a frank talk.”

Theron hesitated, but he had to say it. “And how does Lana fit in?”

“She could have assisted anyone, but she wouldn't. She knows we would kill her. That doesn't
satisfy my gut…but then, I don't think anything will, not for a long time.”

“I'm sorry.”

“So am I.”

*

Rylon had been directed to class, but he'd listened outside ops instead. When he heard his mother’s
name he listened close.

And then ran to find a corner of the temple where nobody was. He crouched and wondered why
his eyes felt so dry.

Mom was so far away. She always was. It couldn't be real, things that happened to her out there.
Here in Ephel was real. They'd come to Ephel to be safe. He wouldn't believe a word about her
until she came back and told him.

Traffic around the corner was noisy and angry. Everyone was trying to talk loud enough for
someone powerful to hear. But everyone powerful had gone to Dromund Kaas for that stupid
Empress. Gone.

He brought his holo out and called.

“Father,” he said. “Father! Father?” Every word tore its way up from deeper inside.

Finally, finally Quinn was there. He frowned past Rylon and then at him. “Rylon? What's the
matter?”

“It's Mom,” said Rylon. Father looked, if anything, colder than before. “She was on Dromund
Kaas. They shot down her shuttle. N-nobody can find her signal. Th-they s-said she’s p-probably
dead.”
“No,” said Father, as if one word could stop all the galaxy crashing down around their ears. “I would have known. Have you searched for her with the Force?”

“I don’t know how,” he said miserably. Mom’s meditations had always been inwardly focused. Good for a fighter. Useless for a seer. For the first time Rylon wished he was the second one.

“This is important,” Father said, rapid-fire. “Reach for her. Do you sense her now?”

He tried. He thought of her uprightness, her inner glow, the wispy scraps of music around the edges of her motions when she was happy. He felt nothing but the room around him. “I d-don’t know, Father. I’m sorry.”

He nodded sharply. “Send me your coordinates.”

“But…”

“They will understand. They must understand. Do you remember the cipher we discussed? Use that. But waste no time.” He leaned back a tiny bit. “Don’t be afraid. She has survived worse than this.”

“I’m not afraid, Father.” It was what he would want to hear.

“I will be there shortly.” He disappeared. Rylon, with shaking hands, encoded the temple’s location and sent it away.

“Well, well,” boomed a deep voice. “You shouldn’t have invited your father. Your mother won’t like that at all.”

Rylon sniffled and stood. He didn’t know what to say. Pierce must have followed him. Maybe Vette was taking the day off. He couldn’t drive this huge man away with words, and hitting him seemed uncalled for. His combat training with Ruth was very good, yes, but beating up the captain of the guard wouldn’t go over well.

“There’s a reason he can’t know where this place is,” said Major Pierce. “I’d tell you but I like breathing. Ask your mother.”

The big man walked away looking satisfied. Rylon waited for the day to get worse.

* * *

Ruth and Acina had reached the clearing. They trailed blood behind them.

“This is not sustainable,” said Valkorion. “You should let her die.”

Ruth glared at the apparition. “And that would benefit me how, exactly?”

“For one thing you would be leaving less blood in the undergrowth. You are being tracked. Can you feel it?”

“You used this world like a tissue. I was born to it. I understand the jungle and I understand that I… that I’m going to die if I can’t get food or shelter or rescue soon. Does that bother you? Dying like a penned animal in the overgrown front yard of the house you condemned?”

“You’re getting poetic.”

“I’m getting angry, Valkorion. I’m in a lot of pain. I don’t need extended time suspensions to draw
out the experience.”

“She remembered his assistance. She remembered the waves of violet ecstasy as he drew through her mastery of the Force to guard her body and destroy her enemies. It had left her feeling so, so empty. After she recognized the history of his genocidal role on Ziost she hadn’t allowed him in again. Empty would just have to do. “You can go hang. I have to light a fire, and kill several carnivores.”

“When you beg for me,” he said, “I will be there.” Then he was gone.

The rustling in the leaves came right on cue. Ruth dragged herself around to stand between the sleen and the Empress. She threw her lightsaber. It took only one shot.

Now if only the next few would be that easy.

She picked up a wet fallen leaf and brushed it with her lightsaber. The saber sheared a section off, leaving a clean black edge. Ruth tried again, not quite touching this time. The edge of the leaf crisped without so much as a wisp of smoke.

“Hand me a branch,” said Acina behind her. “My hands are still good.”

The next rustling stopped at the edge of the clearing. Ruth hefted her saber…

…and deflected a blaster bolt with it.

Ruth checked the forest’s edge, then twisted as much as she could without blacking out from the pain. Shapes were moving from all directions.

“She came right to us,” said someone through a heavy voice modulator. “Maker, lady, no need to rush. We would’ve gotten to you if you’d stayed put.”

Ruth threw her saber again and had to flatten herself to avoid the blaster fire. When she forced herself to her feet she started deflecting. “Acina,” she said. “Can you kill them?”

“Some,” the older woman said tensely. Ruth watched as one man rose from the ground, clawing at his neck. Then she got back to deflecting.

One by one the ruffians choked and fell. “Whose are they?” said Ruth.

“I don’t know. But I’m bleeding again.”

“Damn it. I’m out of jacket.”

“I’ll live. For now. They should have all the cloth you need. Can you check their bodies? ID, anything?”

“Call for me if anything else comes out of the woods.”

“My. You are accustomed to command.”

“We can argue that when we’re back in a medlab.”

“Fair enough.” She fell silent.
Ruth looked at the closest corpse. She took a deep breath. Then, crutch firmly under arm, she started laboring.

*

It was Theron’s holo that went off. Wynston cast a curious look his way. Theron had no explanation for him. He answered.

Only to find Chancellor Saresh herself. “Shan,” she said decisively. “I just heard the news. Let me express my sincere condolences.”

Wynston made a blaster with his hand and fired it into her holographic head.

“SIS reporting has gone downhill since I left,” said Theron. “The Outlander is missing, not dead.”

“Don’t let foolish hope blind you. You are leaderless, as are the Sith. Someone must step in to fill the void.”

“Not you,” said Wynston.

“Not you?” said Theron, looking to Wynston to compare conclusions.

“Not you,” confirmed Wynston. “Have a nice day.”

“I’m surprised you’re so glib under the circumstances,” Saresh said sourly. “I want what your leader wanted: to defeat Vaylin. Join me, and we can finish what the Outlander started.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about what the Outlander is capable of starting,” said Theron. “Call me when you have something to contribute, former-Chancellor.”

Wynston leaned in. “My little sister removed your predecessor from power without breaking a sweat. And I am not as nice as her. Do you really believe you’d be safer with me at your back?”

“I offer alliance and you respond with threats. Is that the kind of organization that’s going to save us all?”


“Bad?” said Wynston.

“Oh so bad,” said Theron. “She wasted no time.”

“If you’re going to step on a broken heart, it’s effective to wait for it to finish breaking. I should know.”

“That’s an Imperial Intelligence thing?”

“Signature move, I’m afraid.”

“I forget sometimes. Your playbook isn’t the same as mine.”

“They’re startlingly complementary.”

“That or you don’t follow yours very well.”

“After all this time? Maybe not.” Wynston let that marinate for a while. Then, “Remember that
time we were looking for Ruth until dawn and it turned out she'd just been on a spirit quest with your mother?"

“Probably not what happened here.”

“No, but we can hope the result is as good.”

“Hope in one hand and fly in the other, man.”

“Certainly.”

*

Hours.

No fire.

Acina’s Force lightning sputtered and died.

“We’re two of the most accomplished people in the galaxy,” said Acina. “Why are wet leaves defeating us?”

Thunder roared. The rain was intensifying again.

*

“Last known location,” said Wynston. “We circle from here to find the shuttle’s path.”

“It didn’t even have a pilot,” said Theron. “Fully automated. If I weren’t this terrified I would be asking what she was thinking.”

“She was thinking she could fit in with the Sith again. The way she did as Wrath, only on her own terms. It would be more of a homecoming than either of us ever gave her.” Wynston banked and fought the storm’s wind. “This is what she gets for it.”

“Whoa. Wynston. Do you see it?”

Wynston swerved. “Yes,” he said tightly. The black scar in the forest ran down into a gorge. “I can’t land there.”

“Let me drop.”

“Are you serious?”

“We’ve got a rope in here. Let me drop. I’ll check for...I’ll...I’ll check for the shuttle’s location. Just circle until I holo.”

Wynston brought his holo out and examined it. “We’re in a jamming field,” he said. “Unknown intensity. Bring a flare.”

“Got it.”

They spotted the end of the ravaged trail and saw the gleam of twisted metal. Theron checked the straps on the drop equipment and made for the door. “Back in a flash with the leaders of the somewhat less than free world,” he said, and smiled. Wynston just nodded and lowered the shuttle.
Wind being what it is, Theron came down a couple of hundred meters away. He closed the distance at a sprint. The front of the shuttle was a shattered ruin. Pieces of the back had bowed and sprung away from the impact. Nothing was moving.

He ran closer and started picking his way through wreckage. The cabin had caved in against a rock. Heart pounding, he fought past the debris and found...two chairs.

And two charred corpses.

He examined them, but they were totally unidentifiable. In fact they were in dramatically worse shape than the mess they were sitting in.

“I think I should be insulted,” he muttered. Only a moron would fall for that. But it meant there were enemies nearby.

He shot off his flare. Their search would have to proceed elsewhere.
Chapter Summary

Ruth makes a deal to send a distress flare in the Dromund Kaas jungle. Ruth and Acina are treated for their wounds. A visitor comes to Ephel to deliver the bad news. (Ruth, Acina, Theron, Wynston, Valkorion, Tebbith, Saresh, Larr Gith)

The second mercenary attack was much better executed than the first.

Acina was drifting in and out of consciousness. Ruth let go. She seized throat after throat. She would absorb the price of such power later.

How desperate did she have to be, to take the Dark Side in hand?

How desperate would she have to be, to submit to her old master?

How much longer could she remain here without losing consciousness or getting devoured?

The pain in her leg had become its own entity, deep and insistent. Six more dead. They carried holos that were being jammed, ID cards that did her no good, credsticks that she pocketed just in case. Then she sat down beside Acina. Pain was a red haze over her vision. All she could do was wait.

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“There,” said Theron. “A clearing.”

“With people in it,” said Wynston. “Or at least people’s things.” He brought the shuttle down against no resistance.

The two of them headed out into the storm, which was shaking out sheet after sheet of muggy rain. There were tents here, and what looked like a latrine.

Somebody shot at them.

Wynston and Theron instantly separated and raised their blasters. They circled the camp. “I don’t want to fight,” yelled Wynston. “We’re passing through on a rescue mission. I can pay for information.”

“We got paid,” yelled someone behind a crate. “And brother, you can’t pay more than this lady did.”

“Who paid you?”

“She paid me enough to not say that.” The man came out and fired. Theron and Wynston both fired back, and one of them hit.

“Is that all?” said Theron.

“Everyone else must have been out. Tampering with the crashed shuttle.”
“Cleaning up the survivors,” Theron said greenly.

Wynston gestured at the wind-whipped pouring. “We can’t take off in this. Our holos are still no...oh. If there’s a jammer it’s probably here.”

But they turned the place upside down and found nothing. Except datapads. Wynston leaned in the temporary lee of the shuttle and started filing through records.

“Here’s something,” said Theron, holding one of his own. He brought it up. Chancellor Saresh appeared as a recording.

“Do you get more perfect than that?” muttered Theron.

“It’s not enough to simply crash the shuttle. I want to see the bodies. No bodies, no bonus.” The Twi’lek vanished.

“I think we have what we need,” said Wynston through what he realized was gritted teeth.

They returned to the shuttle and lurched once more into the storm.

*

Ruth’s leg throbbed. Was this really how it ended? There had been so much more to do. Who would subdue Vaylin, if not her? Who was going to protect the senior staff? Who was going to direct them? Who would take care of Rylon? Who...did Quinn know? Was somebody going to tell him he was finally, finally free of her? He had wanted that once. Would he be happy about it? Or in another direction: would Theron take over? She never meant to trap him into responsibility for a child that wasn’t his. She wouldn’t ask, only...Theron was the one who wouldn’t send Rylon to Korriban. Her baby on Korriban: a worse fate than Tython. She should have said something earlier. She should have made her will absolutely clear.

But somehow, she never ended up planning for her death.

“She is dying,” said Valkorion.

Ruth dragged herself from the weary tread of her thoughts. “So what?”

“You will soon follow. You cannot master the wilderness.”

“Are you going to offer again?”

“Will it be so terrible?” He looked off to one side. “I know it gave you pleasure.”

She remembered the creeping darkness of his orders in those ancient days where she was the Wrath and he was her absolute master. She remembered the taint that clung to her when his command of the Dark Side broke into her mind and rumbled around for his use or amusement. In the years before that purple transformation had been sullying darkness, training her for his control. “Nothing about you ever gave me pleasure.”

“Ah. Then you tolerated it for duty’s sake.”

“Exactly.”

“Liar. Your persistent denial of your need for power does you no credit. Do you want my help? I know you do not wish to die.”
Blood was pooling in her boot. She could not fly. She could not heal. She could not scream loud enough. She couldn’t even stop the continuous impudence of the rain on her head. She squeezed her eyes shut. “Do what you’re going to do.”

She felt it from her core, rippling out like all the power she would ever have, rich and directed for once by someone else. All she had to do was sink into it.

And, hating herself, she did so.

It drew from her surrender. Violet flame burst up in front of her. A shock wave rolled out from it, sending her staggering, and in the center of the clearing the flame leaped for the sky. Rain hissed and evaporated on contact. The clouds took the light like a spear to the belly.

Her body trembled in place. She wanted it to last until her rescue came. She wanted it to last forever. She shivered in the heat and watched as the violet glory rolled up bottom to top and burst in one final shockwave above the trees.

He didn’t speak to her. He probably already had what he wanted.

Ruth waited in taut silence. Had anyone even been in view? Had she sold herself to gain an audience that wasn’t there? Valkorion got petty in mortal danger.

A few seconds passed. Then a minute. Then ten minutes. Ruth lay back against a tussock and closed her eyes, letting the rain and maybe something else run down her face. This was it. She was done. From the jungle of Dromund Kaas she had come, and to it she would return. She hated the cycles of the world. The world shouldn’t be circles. It should be progress. It should mean more than bleeding out on the forest floor six hours from everything she had ever worked for.

There was a sound. Thunder that wasn’t thunder. The new shuttle nosed over the trees and commenced a careful landing. Ruth grappled with her crutch and stood up straight, lightsaber half raised.

Wynston and Theron jumped out into the storm. Theron was just lowering his hand from his cybernetics. Ruth swayed and put her saber away.

“Ruth!” yelled Theron, sprinting. “Ruth, are you – they didn’t – you’re going to be okay, babe. Come on.”

“Theron,” Wynston said, nodding vaguely at Theron’s taller stature. “Can you take the debilitated one?” He passed Theron and came up to Ruth himself. “Let’s get you home.” He looped her arm over his shoulder and took her waist tightly. It was the best embrace she’d ever had.

“Oh,” said Theron, and turned to the Sith lying messily on the ground. “Let’s get you going, Empress.”

“I never expected to be rescued by an SIS agent,” she said, barely audible over the hiss of the rain.

“The list of things I never expected is pretty long at this point.” The taller man lifted her easily. "Let’s go. We’ll have a discreet healer in Kaas City within a couple of hours.”

“If you pilot I can tend to these two,” called Wynston. The four of them climbed into the shuttle, two in mute pain and two in breathless anticipation.

“Lay her there,” said Wynston, pointing. “Ruth, I’m going to let you down on your back. Ready?” She nodded. His wiry strength was enough to let her down gently. He looked at her like she was
new all over. He kissed her forehead, the first clean warmth of the day, and straightened. “That’s it. I’ll get us out of here, Theron, do your thing.”

Theron stepped over and knelt. He reached out to push Ruth’s sweat- and rain-slicked hair away from her forehead. He smiled through his worry. It was her favorite facial expression. She smiled back at him. She was back. The hard decisions could wait. He brushed her cheek with his fingertips and said “Let’s get home, babe.”

She had to think of something brave to say, something to push away what she had just been through. “I’ll let you fly this one time,” she whispered. Then she pushed into the pocket she could access and took out the aurodium and corusca ring. She slipped it back on her finger, and let Dromund Kaas make of it what they wanted. Hiding it hadn’t protected anybody.

Theron kissed her hand next to the ring. Then he cracked open a medpac, Wynston headed to the pilot’s seat, and Ruth sank into the pain: a difficult cushion but a truly enveloping one.

*  
The shuttle returned to the little private pad in middle city. The four stayed inside the shuttle.

Ruth sat up stiffly. Theron stepped forward to help her and she shook her head a tiny bit. Acina seemed to be drifting at the edges of consciousness but the rasp had gone from her breath after Wynston’s ministrations. Theron couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen such an extended bout of gentleness from the usually businesslike Chiss. Ruth wasn’t bleeding anymore, though the boot Wynston had removed was still sluggishly staining the floor. This was as good as it was going to get.

Her eyes had been dilated when they reached the shuttle, her cheeks flushed, her breath a little short. Some kind of shock, thought Theron. That signal had gotten them to the right place just in time.

An hour later a taxi touched down next to the shuttle. Tebbith, tall, brown-tattooed, crowned with horns and robed in unremarkable tan, climbed into the shuttle.

“Oh,” he said. “I’m glad I came. I take it this is the Empress?”

Acina nodded. “Jedi. Barsen’thor, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I have that honor.” Tebbith joined his hands and bowed. “Madam Outlander, I will be with you shortly. Empress, will you consent to let me treat you?”

“As if this day could get worse.” She nodded regally. “Go on.”

Tebbith knelt and started undoing the hideous muddy mass of cloth and canvas that had been wrapped around Acina’s ruined chest and gut. He closed his eyes and stretched out his hand over the wounds. “Mr. Wynston, if you wouldn’t mind finding some water? A gallon, more if you can.”

“As acknowledged.” Wynston swung out of the shuttle. Theron wondered whether he realized he had just gotten orders, and accepted them, from a Jedi. Larr Gith had given suggestions, sure, but she’d never gotten this brisk obedience for them.

Tebbith was humming. Theron couldn’t see exactly what was going on, so he sat next to Ruth, took her clammy hand, and waited. And waited. And waited.

Acina’s head fell back and she sighed. “I need to get back on my feet,” she said calmly.
“Not yet, Empress. You are safe here. Perhaps when you have had some refreshment and a little rest. It would not do for the Empire to see you vulnerable.”


Wynston banged in with a bottle of water half the size of his own torso. “Here,” he said. “How is she…are you all right, Empress?”

“Greatly improved. Your friend is quite skilled.”

“If you’d like to wash up,” he suggested, and set the bottle down. He laid down a few towels beside it.

“Remind me to fund Imperial Intelligence as much as they ask,” murmured Acina, and started wetting a towel.

“Madam Outlander,” said Tebbith. “I will need to put my hands on you to heal. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, of course,” said Ruth. “Do what you need to.”

“Lie back, please.” Theron saw the conflict on her face, but she did as he said. Tebbith took a towel and gently pushed her shredded pant leg away from the long vicious wound. Theron watched every move.

Wynston set a hand on his shoulder. When Theron looked he just nodded. Acina was resting comfortably. Tebbith was humming, his hands moving up and down the red slash. This horrific tableau would be over soon.

He waited. And waited. And waited.

When Tebbith stood Ruth’s face stayed turned up to the ceiling. Her eyes were closed, lashes long and dark against pale eyelids. The peace on her features was deeper than sleep, more luminous than meditation. This woman had stopped ageing for five years. Now she looked like she had reached even deeper back in time than that and arrested everything but the light flush of life. Her breast rose and fell easily, her dignified concession to the requirements of living among mortals.

Theron stared in wonder. “What did you do?”

“Soothed her,” said Tebbith. “Let her forget, for a while, that there is anything but a room of friends and you among them.”

“Now you’re just saying that to flatter me.”

“Ask her when she wakes up. I don’t deal in dianoga oil.” The Zabrak smiled. “She will require followup treatment when we get home. But she will be walking under her own power. I know how much that means to her.”

“Master Tebbith, we, uh, we never talked much. You were always improving our home resources and I was always out shooting things. But…I owe you. For that look on her face, if nothing else.”

“How many times have you saved my life in your travels, directly or in-? There is no debt between us, Mr. Shan.”

"Let’s stay quiet on the way home,” said Wynston. "No need to announce Saresh's failure until we've had the chance to regroup in friendly territory."
Theron nodded. "Then let's hurry home."

*

“All hands in the great hall,” came the rumor. Larr Gith looked up from her consultation in ops. Who the hell was calling an all hands? Did this mean they had found the Outlander?

Stars. Did this mean they hadn’t?

She checked her hair and joined a babble of people flowing toward the temple’s great hall. Larr Gith pushed through toward the dais at one end. Greenish sunlight tipped in dusty slants from the high windows, falling short of the two tiers of balconies overlooking the main room. They were filling up. The stone dais took big steps up to an unfurnished level. Mostly unfurnished: somebody had already set up speakers and a big holocamera there.

A formally dressed Twi’lek was walking up.

“Okay,” Larr said loudly, “who the hell invited her?”

Former Chancellor Saresh of the Galactic Republic cleared her throat loudly. “Thank you for this last-minute gathering,” she said. “As many of you have already heard, your commander is dead.”
The room reverberated with hundreds of voices.

Here were some of them:

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“Pish,” said Major Pierce. “I would’ve known.” Ruth Niral dying was just absurd. He was going to be training her security forces until he couldn’t lift a rifle anymore, and then he’d go out on the next field mission and club someone’s legs off with it. And she would be there, fearless, smiling on her better days, scowling on her best days, regardless of her moral compass du jour, commanding. And she would not decide she was dead, not for many years to come.

“No,” said Torian. “She was a great commander and a great warrior. Show me the killer’s claws or go home.” This was something a bounty hunter knew well: without a body there wasn’t a death. Lord Niral might have disappeared but she could never abandon her Alliance. The Mandalorians associated with the Alliance would throw a great feast to honor her memory, but not until something more tangible than her memory showed up.

“I knew it. I knew it! She gave up after Odessen! She just committed suicide by whatever the hell killed her! She gave up on us!”

“I did not see this,” said Sana-Rae. “But I see her not in the future. I must meditate…without her help this time.” Ruth was a blaze in the heavens when she was excited. Maybe Sana-Rae couldn’t feel that across planets. Maybe that blaze was gone. Maybe she was a visionary with no voice, a Voss with no home…and a woman who had lost the battle-hardened friend of her days in exile to the horrible gaps between truths, no less immutable for being unseen. This was fate. So it went.

<Wrath = problem from start // Wrath = infighting // Jedi = future> It was perhaps lucky for T7-01 that no one was paying attention.

“Sith self-destruct. Big deal. Bring in the next one, we’ll collect us a Dark Council. Ha!”

“No,” said Vette, almost in a whimper. “I would’ve known.” Ruth had just gotten it back together. They were going to be on better terms any day now, any time they both had time…pazaak here and there, the occasional dinner, a space they would gladly close if they ever had the time. No. She couldn’t go away now.
<We must retain her body for rest,> said Yuun. <A search on Dromund Kaas will not be easy, but she merits this.> He had traveled a long road to meet the Outlander. Which way would the Alliance turn without her? So many paths branched from this point, and he found he wasn’t looking forward to any of them. A funeral seemed like the least they could do for an honored leader.

“So that’s how it ends,” mused Aygo. “Not with a bang, but a damned house call.” He wouldn’t mind Saresh’s leadership; she understood how to let a military operate. But it would be a change from the Outlander’s hands-on vigor. And he was getting tired of change.

“Maybe now we’ll get an actually attractive figurehead. Queen bitch is dead, long live the queen.”

T5-M7 whirled in place. <Saber spin = good leader // Elastic = no job listings // T5 = very sorry>

“Damn,” said Hylo Visz. “She was an odd one but she did good business.” Ruth had restrictive ideas of free enterprise, but she was reliable, friendly, and ferociously protective, which wasn’t bad. She had given everything up to and including heart’s blood for this alliance and everybody knew it. Hylo wouldn’t feel right about any successor at all.

“It’s all coming apart. We’re screwed. Where are the Jedi now?”

“She had barely started,” said Doctor Oggurobb. “Does this mean another move for all of us?” His laboratory was a shambles in its temporary space. People were always running backward and forward in a panic. A leader’s abandonment would just tie up funding for more precious weeks. It wasn’t right.

“And our girl Chancellor thinks she has what to gain, exactly?” Gault scoffed. “I doubt that a Force-blind Republic official was the only one to crawl out of that Sith pagen-pile. Playing the vulture from a safe distance seems more her style. And no one’s seen the carrion yet.” It was a very neat con if it worked, which it wouldn’t, because Saresh didn’t know a damned thing about the community she had just strolled into. Now Gault, Gault could pull it off. If anybody asked him, which no one did. The Alliance was temporarily headless. That screamed opportunity, and Gault Rennow had probably better start turning it to the Alliance’s advantage.

“Stars. She was the tough one. How long before Vaylin hunts everyone else down? We need to get out of here.”

“A tragedy!” yelled M1-4X. “She was a hero to the <Alliance>!”

Calline watched in silence. She paid attention to all exits and high perches. Where one leader died, others were vulnerable until normalcy was restored.

“Damn it,” muttered Jorgan. “Not her, too.” He didn’t like Ruth Niral. Not really. But she was a competent commander and she treated her people well. People died in war. At stupid times, in stupid places, for stupid reasons. He hated to see it end like this.

“Never thought I would mourn a Sith. Funny old world.”

Quinn pushed into the back of the hall just in time to hear the words. “No,” he said, in spite of the evidence of his son and now this. His galaxy no longer centered on Ruth, Lord Niral, the Wrath, the Outlander, his former wife. But it relied on her presence somewhere out there. Try though he might, it always would. “I would have known.”

Rylon saw him and squirmed. “No,” he mumbled, and started darting between people to make his way to the temple exit. The grove was calling, and it would be enclosed and quiet, and there no one would see him cry.
“There are dark times ahead,” announced Saresh. “But fear not. I have come to offer you a beacon.”

There was a stir at the far end of the hall. Larr Gith went up on her toes to look.

And rocked back down. “Oh, I was going to upstage her,” she muttered. “Carpe diem—”

“Saresh,” she yelled, and bounded up the brown stone dais. “We export beacons here. Nice of you to try, though. Exactly how did you find this planet?”

The Twi’lek’s features hardened to an aristocratic mold. “What matters is that I am here, now, and ready to take up the banner.”

“So, spies.”

“The Republic has eyes everywhere.”

“Oh, you’re a surveillance state now?” She leaned in, smiling unpleasantly, bringing one hand to the lightsaber she still wore. “No wonder I’m not working for you anymore. And really, who’s going to believe your face on propaganda posters?”

Saresh sneered. “I was controlling the Senate when you were in diapers.”

“Yes, but the difference between you and me is, I’m no longer full of shit.” Larr Gith turned to the assembly. “Look, who are you going to believe, me or this sartorially challenged has-been?”

The hum of the room stabilized on a questioning note. That’s when it happened.

“Larr Gith,” yelled Ruth Niral from the aisle forming down the middle of the floor. “Good watch?”

“Pretty uneventful until the press conference,” called Larr Gith. The panic beside her was slapping the side of her head in waves. Without looking she reached over and seized Saresh’s collar. “How’s your day been?”

Ruth kept her chin up. Theron, Wynston, and Tebbith trailed her. They all looked like they’d just had a thorough scrubbing and crisp new set of clothes. How unlike them to care about their looks or hygiene. They must’ve been in real trouble. “Oh, you know,” said Ruth. “Assassination attempts. Coordinated by Saresh. How are you liking Ephel, Saresh?”

Saresh’s eyes glittered. “You tell me. Outlander.”

It seemed like every Force user in the room felt it at once, Larr foremost. A boy cried warning in the front row. Ruth sidestepped. And an orange blaster bolt ripped through the space where her head had been.

Larr Gith looked up the path of the bolt. There were keyhole windows in a sort of gallery above the main hall, and something was vanishing from one of them. She kept her grip on a suddenly struggling Saresh. This seemed like the kind of confusion an unscrupulous person would take advantage of, and Larr Gith did have one heaping handful of unscrupulous person.

Ruth’s lightsabers flashed a moment too late. It had been a long day, and she was already one or two imminent deaths overdue. She sprinted with Wynston close behind, pushing where necessary through the suddenly panicked crowd. Theron had planted himself in place. She couldn’t tell what
he was doing until seconds later when the flurry of red blaster bolts started scouring the gallery over her head. He was firing as if fully intending to melt through the façade to get to whoever had let off that orange bolt.

“Where the hell are the stairs?” Ruth grunted as she ran.

“Lord Niral,” came Tebbith’s voice, off to one side. “This way.”

The staircase had a hard switchback and Ruth took something metallic to the face as she made the turn. Tebbith cried out without words. The object slowed in falling, then slanted dreamily toward the big Zabrak.

It was a thermal detonator.

It floated to his hands. He cradled it. It blinked in a watery way, as if slowed down by an order of magnitude. “I suggest you protect your eyes,” he said, and waited for her to do so. Something thumped so hard she felt it in her spine.

Blaster fire pulled her out of the moment. Tebbith looked fine, as if exploding things in his hands was a completely normal activity. Wynston was braced in the corner, exchanging fire with that orange-bolt rifle. Admirable but completely uncalled for. “Check for others,” she snapped, and sprinted past him.

She knew the woman skulking behind that heavy silver sniper rifle. The woman was silver herself, with dark markings over her bald head and elaborate piercings catching the low light. Her helmet sat beside her; clearly she wanted to be identifiable when she killed the Outlander.

“Major Fadreleth,” Ruth yelled, and deflected a bolt. “Stop this now.”

“You’re going to run out of friends eventually,” yelled Fade. Tebbith was coming up beside Ruth but Fade didn’t even acknowledge him. She squeezed bolt after bolt, snarling each time Ruth deflected it.

Someone was pounding up the stairs. “Lord Niral,” barked Major Jorgan. “Perimeter is secure. What is…oh, no.”

Fade stopped firing.

“You traitor,” she said, transferring her attention completely to the Cathar. “You bastard. You sold out, and to the woman who murdered my brother.”

“This is a new war,” Jorgan said raggedly. “We all gave up something to be here. Even eye for an eye justice.”

“And your loyalties? And the Republic?”

Something tugged the rifle. Fade yelped and grasped it. Tebbith, frowning hard, dragged the rifle down, pulling it and her down the stairs. She squeezed off a few more rounds, which Ruth deflected into the stone wall. Fade didn’t stand a chance and she was the only person in this stairwell who didn’t realize it.

Fade had already tried to kill Ruth once. By any rational measure, this was the time to destroy her.

“Jorgan?” she said.
“I’d say place her under arrest,” said Jorgan, “but the doesn’t seem to be your style.”

“Consider yourself under arrest.” Ruth stepped forward and started prying Fade’s silver-tipped fingers off the weapon. Fade spat on Ruth’s hand, and again in her face.

Ruth got it anyway. “Tebbith, could you get her arms behind her back?”

“Of course.” He sounded relieved that it hadn’t ended in more conclusive violence. While Ruth hefted the sniper rifle, Tebbith raised a hand that seemed to flatten Fade against the floor. He took charge of her arms, loosely, and let her stand under her own power. “We can arrange detainment.”

“Then do so.”

“And you’re just going to let this happen?” seethed Fade. “I commanded you once!”

“I trusted you once,” said Jorgan. “One more question before they put you away for the rest of your life.” The atmosphere seemed to spark. “Where’s Dorne?”

Fade’s mouth writhed. “She doesn’t know I’m here. I was going to give her the Alliance! I would give it for the Republic! Because she remembers, unlike you. It was for the Republic.”

“There was a time you and I did things for the Republic. But that was a long time ago. Now you’re trailing this corrupt liar for one more chance at revenge? You were better than that, Fade.”

“Don’t ever tell me you know something about ‘better,’” she snarled. “Fine. Outlander. Take me away. Hide me in your darkest pit. Torture me, if you like. Show Jorgan who he’s bowing to now.”

Ruth glared. “I will not.”

Fade’s mouth twitched. “Just move me already.”

Ruth and Jorgan turned to watch Tebbith, with more solicitousness than force, escort her down the stairs.

Jorgan’s shoulders slumped. “She was better than this, once.”

“Before I killed her brother.” Hadn’t Ruth herself hunted down and dismembered everyone who had been involved in her father’s death? And wouldn’t she do it again, given the chance?

He watched where Fade had gone. “Did I lie?”

“No. I’ve killed people for less provocation, but if wanting revenge is a capital offense I’d be the first against the wall.” She hesitated, trying to explain it to herself. “Besides. I think killing her would have disappointed you.”

His eyes narrowed. “Didn’t know you and I were that close.”

“You’re a decent man. And I think I trust your judgment. She’ll stay with us. She might even outlive her hatred.” She steeled herself for more than a momentary glance. “I did.”

He swung his gaze away while they reached the bottom of the staircase. But he pulled up to a crisp Republic salute there. “Ma’am.”

He’d faced his past and given it exactly the treatment it deserved. Ruth wasn’t sure she could do any better herself. She joined her palms over her heart and bowed. “Major.”
Then the world closed in.

*

Ruth went slowly. Honestly, she hadn’t expected so many friends, but everyone seemed pleased to see her now that she’d dispelled the rumor of her death. She clasped hands, smiled, encouraged… and accepted. The crowd thinned out as she passed through the entry hall, with some herding going on by Wynston and Theron. Ruth walked on with Tebbith.

“You said I’ll need more treatment?”

“Only some bed rest,” said the Jedi. “Can I assist any further?”

“No. Thank you. I’m sure your holocrons are calling.”

“As a rule they only do that at night.” He smiled enigmatically and bowed. “It was my honor, Madam Outlander. Until we meet again.”

Ruth walked into the infirmary. Malavai Quinn was standing there.

As if she hadn’t been beaten up enough for one week.

Chapter End Notes

This is Ruth and Jorgan’s final interaction in Knights of the Dawning Alliance. A Colonel of Truth AU picks up after the end of KotDA.
“How…?” She narrowly avoided sputtering.

“My lord,” he said, and bowed. His gaze stayed down. “Do you know where Rylon is? He summoned me here saying you were in danger, but when I landed he was nowhere to be found.”

She couldn’t do this just then. She made her way down the hall to a more or less private bed and laid herself down. He followed. She glared. “How did you know to look for me here?”

“On Ephel? He told me, in code. It wasn’t his fault; I all but forced him to. In the infirmary? I saw you back in the hall. My lord, there is a certain way you carry yourself when you are in pain.” He looked her over. His eyes caught on her ring. His face turned even paler. “My lord?”

Her head filled with fluff. “It’s recent,” she said stupidly.

“The spy?”

The spy. The spy. As if that were the beginning of half what Theron was and Quinn never would understand. “He’s not the one suborning children and using ciphers to infiltrate places he’s not welcome in.” Quinn flinched. “Now, then. You were asking about Rylon?” She took out her holo and dialed.

Rylon came up. He looked a little red around the edges. “Mom,” he said.

“I’m home,” she said. “I’m safe. Can you come meet me in the infirmary?”

His face screwed up. “Is Father there?”

“Yes. He is.”

“Why.”

“You called him, Rylon. Come see us both, it’s all right.”

He disappeared.

“My lord, I feel I…”

“What, Quinn?”
“I should wish you happiness. And I do.”

“Right. You can stop talking about my love life now.”

Quinn looked studiously at the ground. “You’ve had time to think since last we spoke.”

Since Wynston’s intervention, he meant. Since she had been forced to realize that she could just cut Quinn out of her life, using proxies to deal with Rylon’s holocalls. Since she found that, whatever their son grew up to choose, she didn’t owe his memory anything. “Yes. Yes, I have.”

“I see.” He fell silent and turned his back to watch the door, as he had so many times before.

---

Rylon skidded in and stopped, scowling at Father. Then he looked at Mom. She was lying down but he didn’t see anything bandaged anywhere. He took a few steps toward them. “Mom,” he said. “You’re okay.”

“Thanks to Tebbith my leg will heal cleanly. Like nothing ever happened.”

“Oh.” He looked at Father. “What did you do?”

Father looked back at Mom. “What do you mean?” she said, playing innocent so badly it hurt to watch. Mom was supposed to be this amazingly powerful person, but sometimes he got the impression she wasn’t telling the truth. “Your father and me?”

He nodded.

Father didn’t look innocent, only tired. “What did you hear?”

“I don’t know. He just said you couldn’t be here because you did something.”

“Pierce,” said Mom and Father together. She continued. “I’ll have a word with him.”

“More than one, I should think, my lord?”

“I know, Quinn.” She looked around. “I didn’t want it to happen like this. We need privacy if we’re going to have this conversation. There’s a closet they’re turning into something down that way. It should do.”

Mom got to her feet and Rylon could feel her efforts crushing together in the Force. She was barely holding it together. He offered a hand and she took it tightly. What it was that could drag her so close to desperation, part of him didn’t want to know. He would have to know soon if he was supposed to defend himself.

Inside the supply closet she lay on a mat on the floor. Father took a seat, and Rylon faced the two of them.

“I don’t know how to begin,” said Mom. “I’ve had so much time...but I was never ready.”

Father looked down on her. “Should I, my lord?”

“No. No. Rylon, your father and I love you very much. No matter what.”

Too much buildup. “Could you get more ominous?” he muttered.
Mom sharpened. “Say that again, young man?”

“Sorry, Mom. I know.”

“Rylon, when I met your father we were both working for Darth Baras. He was a very powerful Sith and he maintained an extensive network of contacts, us among them. When your father helped me deal with a threat on Balmorra, a spy named Rylon, the reason I met your father, Baras rewarded him by giving him his choice of assignments. He chose me.” She looked at Father.

“My purpose was more complicated than that,” said Father. “I was to track her methods and her loyalty. Though her results spoke for themselves.”

“He handled the communications with Baras - why wouldn't he? The excerpts he shared with me were glowing praise. I didn't see a problem. I was trying my best and being rewarded for it. We…I don’t know if you really want to hear this.” Rylon just watched. “I fell in love.” Father stirred but said nothing. “We worked for Darth Baras, very effectively, and…we were married. We were very happy.”

Rylon had seen that smile on Father before, sometimes, in moments of approval. It was the one that wasn't sad. “We could do anything,” said Father, staring at Mom. “But…Baras felt she would turn on him.”

“He knew I would turn on him. Let's not varnish that, as a Light Side Sith I had a duty to destroy such a monster as soon as I was strong enough. But he didn't come after me himself. You'd think I'd have learned that. He ordered your father to kill me.”

Rylon stared at Quinn. “And you just did it? You didn't even say no? Did you want Baras alive more than Mom?”

“I wanted your mother alive,” insisted Father. “I wanted her safe, as safe as a Sith can ever be, and I wanted to be the one at her back, to support, to do for her some fraction of all she did for me. But Baras was more powerful. And I still owed him for my career - your mother thought that debt was discharged in our little stage play on Balmorra, but in reality no debt to that man was ever expunged. I took my orders.”

Mom had flinched at “stage play.” “He built droids and turrets to try to kill me,” she reported. “He failed. He submitted to imprisonment and that’s where I kept him until I had dealt with Baras. Then I expelled him from my life with one condition: I wanted you to know him. I wanted you to know the person he’d been when his back wasn’t forced against the wall by people more powerful than him. I wanted you to see him without bitterness, the way I had. I wanted you to have your father, Rylon.”

“But you let him go away with me! How did you trust him?”

“At first? Those visits were under armed guard. But understand this. When I was imprisoned by the Eternal Empire your father gave up his career to look for me. To save me. When you were kidnapped he looked for you, too. If not for him you would still be on Tython and I wouldn’t know if you were dead or alive. And…and you would stop remembering me, in time. It had been so long. He looked for you, not because it gave him an advantage or pleased another Sith or fulfilled his professional duty - he looked because he loves u-you.” She rushed as if Rylon hadn’t heard it, as though it weren’t an explosion over the entire conversation. “He loves you. That's why I trust him with you. Baras is dead, and your father has given years of his life to set things right. I’m not cruel enough to respond by shutting him out completely.”
“So you didn't tell me because you don't want me to hate him.”

“That's right.”

“I was just going to start hating him as soon as I found out.”

She shook her head, eyes wide, still a paler blue than his. “Please, Rylon. People do terrible things in the Empire, which is one of the reasons I left. I don't excuse that but I do understand it. People do terrible things to survive. Only the special ones rise above that. He saved my life so many times...the skill I had, the passion I used to succeed, it was all tied up with him. Everything he was for the Empire, strong, responsible, supportive, heroic, he was for me.”

Father’s hand stirred at his side and fell. “Everything you were for the Empire, powerful, passionate, headstrong, incomprehensibly merciful…you were for me.”

Rylon looked at one then the other. “Then why did you try to kill us?”

“He didn't know about you,” said Mom. “We knew the possibility, but…neither did I.”

“Yeah, but what if he had known?”

He hadn’t been ready for the silence.

Father stared at the floor. His mouth opened, closed, opened again. Too long later he said “I could never—”

Rylon gagged on the feelings trying to crawl out of his chest. “No,” he choked, and ran.

* 

The door fell shut.

“If I could run…” said Ruth.

“If he would listen…” said Quinn.

“I am sorry. I didn’t think it would happen like that.”

“You hit the main points succinctly. You were…allowed to say I loved you.”

“I thought it would be simpler if I didn’t.”

He gave her a hand up and she accepted it. She felt a twinge in her leg; Tebbith had worked well, but she would have to do the last of the healing herself.

“My lord,” murmured Quinn. “You defended me.”

“For his sake.”

He nodded. “It's been so long since we spoke. Since you stopped allowing me to speak with you.”

He had kept his arms around her, loose, ready to take her weight but not insisting on it, like old times. It was more restful than standing. “It gave me space to think. I needed that. And I reached some conclusions.”

“Yes?”
“I said what I did for Rylon’s sake. I want him to accept you the way I used to. So I’m not going to say this to him. Not now, maybe not ever.”

He frowned, studying her face. “Not going to say what?”

She set her feet knowing she would need her best balance. “I see you didn’t mention that you agreed with Baras, and that’s what made up your mind.”

“Would he care? Your ideology won.”

“It never changed you.” She turned up her face to his, the age-old step in the dance. And she knew the words she had written for the accompanying song after many, many false starts and scratch outs. “I was eighteen. You were thirty-three. You counted on my youth, which I couldn't help, and my stupidity, which I should have. My love for you was true and real and one of the greatest experiences of my life, and you treated it like another variable in your all-important equation. A variable you didn’t mind setting to zero. I hope our son talks to you again. I know you've changed. You've worked hard. But you can't work for me.”

“And that is the truth, my lord? The one you covered in platitudes about heroism for Rylon’s benefit?”

“Yes.”

Quinn’s jaw worked for a few seconds. “Permission to speak freely, my lord?”

“Do.” It was the first time in eleven years she’d spoken honestly with him about what had happened.

His lip curled, the smallest effort before he stopped it. “You were old enough to chase me,” he said.

Her jaw dropped. “You could've stopped me! I told you to stop me if that's what you wanted!”

“I tried! But there's only so much worship a man can take from a woman like you before he starts to break down. Seeing you, touching you, day after day, knowing I could have you with a word at the mere cost of my integrity.” He moderated his voice. “My lord. I was younger then too. You were everything I wanted, back then, and you wanted me. Yes. I gave in. I permitted you to love me. No matter whom I blamed for it, this analysis never changed: I still can’t see that scenario ending any other way.”

“You make my skin crawl,” she said quietly.

His breath was warm on her lips. “Then don’t touch me,” he whispered.

Her hands were on his chest and they weren’t supposed to be. She jerked away, feeling every inch of his fingertips sliding around her waist to release. She raised her left hand to show her ring finger between them, bejeweled and riveting. “I trust you can find your own way out,” she said in her old command tone. It was the wrong voice to use, a predictable turn-on, but it was too late to take back.

He covered his face with both hands. “My lord,” he said urgently.

She pressed her eyes shut. “What?”

He didn't touch her, and she tried not to wait for it. “I didn’t come here for this,” he said. “You
must believe that.” She opened her eyes, listening. “When I realized that this is how I can expect to learn of your death…and when I found that death to be false…and when you spoke of the past with something other than abject hate, even if that was a wild slant of the truth for our child’s sake…” He stopped a hand halfway to her cheek, caught himself, rocked back on his heels and balled his fists behind his back. “‘Forgive me’ scarcely seems to cover it, but I hope you can. I know you despise what I was, but you’re right. I have changed. I have a career. I have…someone. I have a son, but he is not a point of entry to your world. I am not trying to insinuate myself back into your life.”

“No. Just into my pants.”

He was finally looking her wholly and exclusively in the eye. Piercing, that was the word, and always had been. He touched his chest where her hands had been. “You have always met me halfway,” he said. “Remember that, if you must damn someone.”

“Bastard.” She un-took a forward half step she hadn’t realized she’d taken. She clenched her left fist so her nails and ring dug into her palm. “You came here for our son. You came here to help him because I was gone.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then I forgive you coming. But let nothing short of my actual death bring you here again. Let our son call you…if he wants you now that he’s heard the kindest possible interpretation of what happened.” Because after eleven years she still wanted to touch her former husband. Because being on the same planet was too much strain. Because they had had time to fashion knives from their memories. Because if it were mere lust or mere responsibility it would be simple, but here simplicity was something they had to impose.

Her last volley had left him dead white. “I understand,” he said, not hiding a look at her mouth and then, less warmly, at her hand. “Goodbye,” he said, and bowed, and walked out with the brisk confidence of the consummate Imperial officer.

Which was his life. She limped back out to the infirmary and picked a bed. She closed her eyes to show she didn’t care when he left. She wondered whether he looked back.

Peace was a lie not granted to people like her. Some days she resented that.

*

This was what Rylon had been hoping for:

“It’s nothing,” said Mom. “Your father and I disagreed once, but it’s better now.”

“I’ll come see you,” said Father. “It will be all right.”

“Will you tell me what happened?”

They did, finishing each other’s sentences. Whatever the history might be, Rylon wasn’t sure on the details, or even the major points, but maybe, maybe it meant they could stop being mad.

*

This was what Quinn knew better than to hope for:
He gave her a hand up and she accepted it. She didn’t let go “My lord,” he murmured. “You defended me.”

“For his sake.”

He nodded. “It’s been so long since we spoke. Since you stopped allowing me to speak with you.”

He had kept his arms around her, loose, ready to take her weight but not insisting on it, like old times. “It gave me space to think. I needed that. And I reached some conclusions.”

“Such as what?”

“I want it to do over,” she said, in the hard voice that said she meant it. “We never had a chance. We can now. If you want this.”

“I never wanted anything el–” She kissed him before he finished the sentence. He pulled her closer, spreading a hand up her back, fingertips digging into her lower back under her shirt. He kissed her the way they had kissed in other years, on other planets, in other circumstances, back when it was exhilarating and wrong. She toyed with his tongue and undid his collar.

“Come to my quarters,” she whispered.

“You’re wounded,” he warned.

Her eyes sparkled. “When did that ever stop us?”

*

This was what Ruth did hope for, badly:

“My lord. I was younger then too. You were everything I wanted, back then, and you wanted me. Yes. I gave in. I permitted you to love me. No matter whom I blamed for it, this analysis never changed: I still can’t see that scenario ending any other way.”

“You make my skin crawl,” she said quietly.

He was so close, the kiss was only the slightest turn, the most devastating adjustment. He tightened his arms around her, strangely gentle now, taking his time in accelerating toward the crazed exchange of caresses that they had had once. Back when he’d had her heart in his hands and acted like he didn’t know what to do with it. Had anything really changed, since then?

Yes.

She thought about it, every blazing detail. Then she left his mouth and let go. That was it. It was enough. She was free.

“Goodbye,” she said, and that was all.

*

Rylon hurried to the Force enclave. There was something he had to do.
This is Quinn's last appearance in KotDA. Not his last appearance in his son's life, not by a long shot...but that doesn't get fixed today.
**Chapter Summary**

Rylon requests training. Theron and Ruth unpack Quinn and future plans. Calline returns from a job and gets a new one: an old contact of Ruth’s. Contact is established. (Rylon, Sana-Rae, Theron, Ruth, Calline, Wynston, T5-M7, Old Friend)

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sana-Rae looked up from her meditation. There was a river-carved grotto that she had adopted as a Force enclave, practically built to order; shadows stirred here but she did not fear them. She looked up because young Rylon Niral was stalking in, his black hair in disarray, his dark blue eyes ringed with red.

“Rylon,” she said gently. “Are classes not in session?”

“Didn’t want to go,” said Rylon. “Sith get trained specially anyway, not regular classes.” He drew himself up. He was getting taller. “I want you to teach me.”

“Of course. We can use any of our exercises…”

“Not lightsaber, Master Sana-Rae.” He was thinking of another battle in another time, but Sana-Rae could not see what. “I want to feel when somebody’s lying. I want to find someone who’s missing. I want to see the future.” Rylon bit his lip. “I want to see.”

“I understand.” Sana-Rae was a Mystic, one who saw the truth in visions, and here in the grotto there were others who could sate the boy’s hunger for knowledge. Master Tebbith would be there soon, and he could complement Sana-Rae nicely. “Come with me.”

---

Theron was standing in the infirmary. He was making a face. “Quinn? Really? Now?”

Ruth lay back on the medbay bed and rubbed her temples. “I know. It would have made Rylon less scared had someone not decided to open up his entire past right then. As it is Quinn just terrified him. There was nothing I could say to make him understand.”

“That’s because there is no understanding what he did to you. You think we can find Rylon?”

“Theron, I don’t know where he goes when he’s upset. I don’t know what he thinks. I’m going to give him a little time. Then break out the search parties.”

“Okay,” said Theron. He touched her hand. “Tell me how I can help.”

“Give me one hour without a crisis.”
“We might have to go back to the ship for that.”

“We better. I can walk, it’s just a twinge.”

“Sure. Do I publicly support you?”

“No. It’s really not that bad.”

Not the confidence he wanted, but Theron fell in beside her. The place was chaos, naturally. They made their way out to the landing plateau to the plum spot reserved for Ruth’s vessel.

And they headed up and into the bedroom. Ruth stopped at the foot of the bed. “Are these sheets new?”

“I guess,” said Theron. “I kind of picked at random.”

They were white shading to violet around the edges. “Let’s get new ones,” she said, and tore them off the tawny mattress. Then she lay down and sighed. “Beloved. I know it’s a mess out there but I am just, so, happy to not be bleeding out on the jungle floor.”

“You and me both.” He stretched out beside the study she presented in lean muscle. “What was that signal back there in the jungle? It was beyond unnatural.”

Ruth looked away. “It must have been one of Acina’s abilities. I had nearly given up.”

“Well, she might have used it eight hours earlier, saved us a lot of pain.”

“Some things only become possible in desperation.”

He looked at her. She was serious. He leaned over to kiss her forehead. “Forget it. Can we talk about something?”

“Anything.”

“Is Rylon going to keep talking to Quinn?”

“Once he’s calmed down, I suppose, yes.”

“Don’t force him to.”

“What?”

“Take it from a guy who didn’t have parents. Having one you don’t trust won’t help. Let him have his space.”

“If anything happens to me…Theron, I don’t want to force you into anything. But when I was out there, bleeding, when I thought I was going to die, I was thinking. I don’t want Rylon to go to Korriban. He would survive but it would rip things out of him that can’t be replaced. I should know. Quinn would adore him, stars, he could be so good except this one point, hell, he can visit he can do almost anything once I’m out of the way…but he would send him there and think it’s an honor. I can’t let that happen. I need someone who understands what I want his care to be, not just that I want it, but why I want it. I need someone who understands me. If I don’t come back someday, will you take care of him?”

“Yes. Absolutely. I hope that day doesn’t come for another hundred years or two.”
“And if I'm busy here and there doing Alliance things and I delegate authority? Will you take care of him?”

“Always.”

“You think he might accept you for being something more official than Mom's friend?”

“I hope so.”

“Do you love me?”

“Beyond all reason.”

“Are you just saying what I want to hear to lull me into a false sense of security?”

He dropped the smile. “I'm not that guy.”

“Oh, Theron, I know.” She leaned in and wrapped one arm around his torso. Then she pressed her face to the bed and started shaking.

“Hey,” he said in a reflexively problem-quashing tone. “Ruth. Babe, don't.” She kept quivering. “Don't, it's okay. We're okay. We don't have to talk about this if…”

“I can't take any more surprises,” she mumbled.

“Oh.” He thought about it. It was worth a try. “Then this would be a bad time to talk about our wedding?”

She stilled.

He kissed her hair, nuzzled that faint scent of leather and lilies. “Just a thought.”

Some time later, Ruth sighed. “I'm okay,” she said dully.

“You sure?” said Theron.

“Yes. I'll be okay.”

“Tawny” rightly applies to certain breeds of savannah fauna and the eyes of a small percentage of lucky sentients. It carries a frisson all its own, and is probably best when curved around by a top-notch set of cybernetics.

At least, in Ruth's opinion.

He had shaved recently. She liked the look. Ruth had grown up commanding military, which had regulations for some ranks and outfits; she was familiar with the compulsion of the habit, though one of these days she was going to tease Theron with the cumulative time he had spent at it.

Teasing. She got to do that. He had a sense of humor. He had incredible shoulders, one of which was presently visible up his shirt sleeve as he reached for something behind her on the bed. She caught and stroked his arm, nudging the sleeve over his biceps. “I love you,” she said.

“I haven't even started yet,” he said. He grinned his ravishingly understated grin and passed this thumb across her lower lip. “Oh, I love it when I get that look from you.”

“What look?”
“That’s for me to know and you to keep doing.”

That might lead somewhere, only she had just broken her leg in four places. “We were going to talk.”

“Yes, we were. Wedding. Have a pillow.” He tucked it behind her head, pushing her pleasantly close to his open shirt. Then he settled with his arms around her. “Ruth? You sure you’re okay?”

She slid a hand into his shirt, just enough to run fingertips over the muscles of his chest. She gave him an impish look. “What were we talking about?”

“Shows you how much you value my input.” He laughed, though, and his semi-callused hands ran gently over her cheek and shoulder. “I asked you to marry me a few weeks ago.”

“Mm. I was there. I said yes.”

“Yes, you did.” He ran a fingertip from their joined torsos up between her breasts and to her collarbone, chin, and a dot on the nose. “And then everything went down the refresher. Ruth, I’d like something planned. Maybe not a lot. Just enough to look forward to while the galaxy’s coming down around our ears.”

“I’d like that.”

“You’ll have to tell me if anything overlaps with how it was your first time so we can not do any of that.”

“All right then, but you’re ruling out elopement.”

“Tempting, but this is going to be an affair of state. They wouldn’t let you.”

Vague recollections of the rare fantasies of Korriban floated up. Maybe every girl dreamed about her wedding but not many of them dreamed of making it the power couple of the Empire. In a way it had been self-defense: getting the second most powerful person you knew on your arm was a little safer than not. Love was not necessary. Such were the dreams of young Sith. “And you’re...okay, with an affair of state?”

“I’m okay with you. That you became the leader of the galaxy’s fourth great power and the second one that anyone likes, well, nobody’s perfect.” He grinned. “Besides. When I think about telling everyone that I want to spend the rest of my life with you...there’s fireworks. There are stunt fighter formations. There are public monuments turning blue to match your eyes. There’s me finding a place to hide for a while, maybe sending a body double for the holos, but the fireworks are still there.”

She smiled. “There’s a crowd so big people are crammed around holoprojectors miles away so everyone can hear us say it. There’s a day off.”

“The most extravagant part so far.”

She smiled wider. “Where do you want it? We should maintain some shred of secrecy about Ephel. Coruscant was beautiful but I don’t trust them now.”

“Dromund Kaas would be a homecoming for you, but likewise.”

“We met on Yavin.”
“They formally banned us from Yavin after that incident.”

“Well, Odessen’s out.”

“When did we get this unpopular?”

“Rishi,” she said.

“Rishi?” he said thoughtfully. “Did you ever go there?”

“I never walked on the surface. I was up with the Imperial fleet for the battle.”

“You missed a lot. And then before I worked up the nerve for hello you disappeared without saying goodbye. All those nights under that dwarf galaxy, avoiding the stars and the breeze because I thought I had better things to do. I regretted so, so many chances.”

“Like when you got captured and tortured by the Revanites. Yes, I can tell I should have been a priority at that point.”

“You have no idea.” He scoffed the kind of scoff that said he didn’t want to be vulnerable. “Of course, I got over the whole attraction thing, first because you were a masked killing machine, and more importantly because I knew the sad woman behind that mask would never be interested in me. Nobody wants to think about that many ‘no’s.’

“I didn’t want love. I wanted revenge. But they took my mask away. And then…there you were. The way you looked at me on Odessen was exactly the same way you looked at me the day you first saw my face. I just hadn’t realized what that meant.” She reached to clasp his hand and kiss it. “Let’s do Rishi.”

“Okay,” he whispered huskily. He looked at her lower lip and, whatever it was he saw there, grinned again. “You know, I have an awful idea.”

“White dress? You know I’m not doing a white dress. Republic garbage.”

“We’re throwing a big event with a lot of décor and people to manage.”

“Well, yes.”

“We know somebody who can do that.”

Ruth thought about it. Then she thought about hitting him, lightly. After a count of ten seconds of widening smirk on his part she said, “Larr Gith is not planning our wedding.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone I would find more competent.”

“The kitchen droid? Tora’s bratty monkey-lizard? Valkorion?”

“No,” said Valkorion.

“Shut up or I’ll make sure you get a wedding night you will never scrub out of your eyes,” muttered Ruth.

“It was just a thought.” Theron kissed her forehead. “It’ll keep her out of your hair until it’s time to do your hair.”

She mussed his, firm gel be damned. “She’s not getting me into a white dress, either.”
He made a face and tried to smooth it back. “Put the logistics in her hands. She loves parties and she's got connections.”

“She hates me.”

He laughed. “You two have a healthily dynamic dynamic, that’s all.”

“You really think she can coordinate stunt fighters?”

“And fly the lead herself to show off. That’s a Jedi Master thing, at least the egomaniacs. It’d be flawless.”

She nuzzled his jaw and kissed him. That mouth was made for kissing things. “If I knew you were this crazy I might not have said yes.”

“If I knew you were this stubborn…oh, who am I kidding. I knew.” He wrapped an arm around her waist. She snuggled into him, athletic and warm and sensual all over, and with that she had everything.

* 

Wynston saw Calline on the way to ops, and slowed. She was armored again, with her helmet under her arm. A little green astromech, sans restraining bolt, was trailing at her heels.

He nodded to her. She nodded back. “Wynston,” she said coolly in her pleasant Cheunh accent. “Calline,” he said. “How are you?”

“Passing through.” She ducked her head toward the astromech. “Ready to report, Teefive?”

Report = ready // missing pumpkin = trapped soon

Wynston frowned. “What?”

Calline grinned. “She talks like that.”

Whatever ‘that’ meant. “Don’t tell Ruth, she has enough trouble with the normal ones.”

“Sith. No gratitude.” Her smile faded. “So long, Wynston.”

“Take care, Calline. You can always call me.”

She nodded jerkily and moved on, T5 following close behind. It wasn’t exactly the protection he would want for his little sister, but she seemed to be satisfied. He stood and watched for a moment. Her gait was relaxed and her head high. She wasn’t running away. Well, it wasn’t much to go on, but it was something.

* 

Calline walked into ops. “Shipment,” she said, jerking her thumb back.

“I’ll transfer the funds,” said Theron. “Thank you.”

Calline waited. These people had been giving her busywork ever since she had left the site of her
Calline kept coming back to Odessen for jobs because well, they paid her. That was a good enough reason. No other reason would make any sense. They paid her, and then she got on with her life.

Any more busywork? She waited.

“Actually,” said Ruth, “I had a request.”

Calline stared her in the eye and waited. Ruth brought up a map view on the main holo. She crossed her arms and took a stand, craning up more than a little to meet Calline’s gaze. “Her name is Jaesa Willsaam. And she doesn’t want to hear from me.”

---

It took weeks of Holonet searches, interviews, bribes and rumors, but Calline eventually got a planet. Then it was time for old-fashioned legwork. The place wasn’t even populated according to most people. A flyover would have to do, and she did it, with T5-M7 monitoring every second she was busy eating or sleeping.

She perked up when she saw the roofs barely visible through the forest canopy. She checked her readings.

Her readings showed no sign of technology or habitation.

She looked up. She looked down. The readout was completely flat. Even more so than it would be naturally scanning a rural area. She checked her records. The last time she’d passed this region, that flattening happened, too.

“Nasty,” she muttered. “Teefive?”

Her astromech beeped. Forest = boring // problem = on fire?

“No.” Calline checked her readings one more time. “Take us down.”

---

Ruth excused herself from Rylon’s homework and took the holo in her bedroom. “Yes?” she said. Calline stood rigid, armored as always. “Sith. Got a lead on your Jaesa.”

Everything thrummed once and held still. “Is she…alive? Is she well? Where is she?”

“Yes, maybe, here. Sending coordinates.”

Ruth missed the landing spot on the first flyover, for some reason. She relied less on sensors and more on the Force the next time, and she found a clearing where Calline’s battered brown vessel was already resting.

The Chiss was outside, tossing things in the air and shooting them. She stilled as Ruth landed, and stayed put until Ruth had come out of her own ship.

“Which way?” said Ruth.

Calline pointed. “Half a klick.” She tapped her holo as if to signify she would forward the coordinates.
As if any guidance was necessary. As if any could help. Ruth found herself tongue-tied. The distance between her and Jaesa had been entirely her idea. But maybe Jaesa had come to prefer it. What could she come as, but the Outlander conqueror? What else had she been doing with her time? “Come with me,” she managed.

Calline looked down at her. With a deliberate movement she put her faceless electrum helmet on.

“I’ll pay you,” said Ruth. “Come with me.”

The Chiss nodded obliquely. “Magic words,” she said, and fell in behind Ruth’s shoulder.

Ruth didn’t know this place. She didn’t know this sector, this planet, and she certainly didn’t know how her old apprentice had made her way here after their unceremonious parting. Ruth wore her weapons openly but she let her hands swing free of them. The day was clear, the forest open and redolent of things growing. She might be going to someone she had disappointed, badly. But, she hoped, it wasn’t an enemy.

Calline slowed at the first sight of the polished metallic buildings among the trees. “Careful,” she said.

“You saw her here?” said Ruth.

Calline nodded. She pointed at the nearest building. People were passing to and fro, but this door was, at the moment, closed.

Ruth set back her shoulders, lifted her chin, and walked in.

The hallway was high and well-lit and slightly curved. Ruth kept her hands well clear of her weapons now. She rounded the corner into a broad office dominated by one woman, seated, dark hair spilling over half her face and concealing none of its prettiness.

Ruth cleared her throat. She would have said more, but Jaesa looked up. Her face lit up like a sunrise in half a second’s time. “Ruth!” She spread her arms wide and ran. Ruth tensed. Jaesa threw her arms around her and hugged her, tight.

Tardily, Ruth returned the hug.


“Oh, no,” said Calline. She jerked a thumb in a random direction. “See you.” And she made herself scarce.

“Jaesa…” said Ruth.

She straightened a wide grey scarf. “Yes?”

“The last time we parted I said I would kill you if you got in my way.”

“Yes, I remember that part.”

“I told you your stupid school would never work and your Light Side Sith would be crushed by the real world.”

“I considered putting that on the wall, but opted against it.”
“Let’s not forget what I did to you before I met you.”

“You know I understand why.”

“Why the hell are you happy to see me?”

Jaesa just smiled. “We’re friends. A crisis of faith can put that on hold. That’s all.”

Ruth gave up. “How are you? How are your people? Are you…I mean…are you safe, here?”

“We’re well hidden thanks to a friend we rescued from pirates a few years ago. He has unique talents. As for my people…” she stepped back and made a sweeping gesture… “the school is thriving. The war actually took pressure off of us, as the Empire was busy with external threats.” She smiled again. “I suspect you weren’t exactly on the enforcement squad that did look for us.”

“No. I never volunteered to hunt down ‘traitor’ Sith.” Funny, given how passionately she had pursued any other kind of traitor she’d found. Somehow the two closest to her heart had been left untouched.

“I can show you around the school. We’ve come a long way since meeting in the dark of night in alleys in the city.”

They startled each other, talking about the ten years’ absence they had taken from each other’s lives. Jaesa was married with twins running and climbing all around campus. Ruth was…well, she was exactly what she had become after this long road. Their journey ended outside the dining hall, a place like all the others here, bright and clean and free of the blood that had caked Korriban. Ruth greeted all and sundry without asking to be introduced. This place was strange to her, built by someone who hadn’t taken the path to power yet clearly had a planet’s worth of influence. She took her tray and walked with her old apprentice back to said apprentice’s office.

“Can I ask you something, Ruth?”

“Of course.”

“May I use my power on you?”

“You didn’t already?”

“I want you to know when I do it.”

“Then proceed.” The trusting invitation came before the sickening doubt. Ruth held still and prayed Jaesa’s judgment would not be too harsh. Because, well, Ruth could say she had nothing to hide, but someone in her head did.

Jaesa looked up, frowning. “What is…in you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“From your imprisonment.”

“Yes.”

“That is why the Emperor vanished. That is why Arcann chases you specifically.”

“That’s why it’s not just me anymore. Much though I wish it were.”
“He is separate within you. Do you feel that?”

Ruth hesitated. “If he were separate I would’ve found a way to get him out.”

“I have a feeling that if I asked around, I would meet a lot of people who know you’ve done things that weren’t motivated by him.”

“Jaesa… you could, if you wanted to. I was going to ask if you would come with me.”

Jaesa leaned back, letting out a slow breath. “I wouldn’t mind,” she said. “But I’ve built something here, something I’m not willing to walk away from. We’re closer to turning the Empire inside out than we’ve ever been. We have a contact next to the Dark Council. And we’re working with the Jedi, too, in secret. We are exactly where we need to be.”

“Your trainees? Would you consider doing an exchange program with the Voss and Sith trainers on Odessen?”

Her brown eyes looked softer than ever, but soft didn’t mean weak. “For your war, Ruth?”

“I don’t see how any of our people can avoid that, Jaesa.”

“I do. Here. I’m glad to see you, but I’m not going to make my school a training ground for your soldiers. We all have our battles, and my students will face theirs. They’ll make a difference in the galaxy. But they won’t do it with me or anyone telling them where to fight.”

“The Eternal Empire threatens us all. Especially with Vaylin in charge.”

“We can’t ignore the other problems of the Empire and Republic just because some of us are on the front lines. You can’t put reform on hold for every external threat, or else you’ll lose what you were fighting for to start with.” Jaesa looked Ruth in the eye. “You’re out there and you’re fighting the right fight, and it sounds like I’ve been relying on you for that for a long time now. Trust me when I say that not everyone I meet is destined for the same part of that fight.”

“Some of them? Maybe?”

“They’ll have that choice.” Her seriousness eased for a moment. “You were always charismatic. Given the choice, I think many of them will follow.”

“You know I won’t throw them away.”

“I know.” Jaesa sat on the edge of her desk and looked away for a moment. “Ruth, I didn’t realize when you were captured. I thought you had decided to leave for good. Me, the Wrath…always leaving shoes a little too big for anyone else to fill. If I hadn’t left it like that, maybe this would have gone differently.”

“Maybe I needed to lose everything to get to where I am.” Would anyone have cared about her if she were just another powerful fighter in that onslaught at the start of the war? Would Theron have picked her out of that lineup? Would he have bothered? Not the point. “Can we start again now?”

“Will I see you again?”

“Count on it.”
Theron is in favor of grand gestures until it actually comes time to make them happen, at which point he would remember how panicky he should be.
Lana had sent the requisite bioscan of Khem Val’s corpse. Now that the drama of the Outlander had played out and she could breathe without fear of having a grief-crazed Alliance coming down on her head, she called Darth Scythia again.


“I see,” said Lana, surprised and a little stung. “I wish to discuss my terms for employment.”

Scythia cut in. “My dear! You have such an interesting idea of your relationship to me! Just because I’m temporarily offstage doesn’t mean I’m desperate.”

Maybe not, but she was sounding ragged around the edges. Her flight from Ruth’s wrath had been the kind of fast that would go down in history books. “I haven’t signed anything with you yet, Lord Scythia. I’m hoping we can come to an arrangement.”

“I’m really surprised you’d talk to me after I bombed Odessen to rubble. I guess it’s true what they say about Lana Beniko: consummately pragmatic.”

“I like to believe so. When can we meet?”

“Meet? Oh, no.”

“Oh?” Everything depended on this. She wanted to work with a, well, consummately pragmatic power, one who could take the shots and eliminate the problems that Ruth’s Alliance couldn’t stomach handling. But she needed to have the measure of the person she was working for. She was a fair judge of character in person.

Scythia was scowling. “You think you get physical access to me just because I’ve hired you?”

“You did mention ‘bodyguard.’”

“No. You did. Don’t get ahead of yourself, Lord Beniko. I have use for a strong arm in the field. What I do not have a use for is a woman knowing something as valuable as my whereabouts while actively pining to buy back a homecoming to her enemy-faction lover.”

Oh. That fantastic indiscretion, that thing Lana had been trying to regret ever since she’d started with him. Her weakness. A practical Sith would remove him herself so he could never be used as
leverage. A practical Sith like…like she was. This wasn't Odessen. Courteous talk and hugs didn't get results. “I could dispute that, but I won’t. Where do you need me?”

“Patience. I want you to understand what you’re getting into, as much as anyone does in this life. I stand for order, Lord Beniko. I am the fixed point, the guiding star. I am how you know what monsters will come for you at night and I am the one who commands them to stop...if you make it worth my while. You should know that you will always know where you stand with me.”

“You poisoned twelve Sith at a banquet last year with no warning.”

She fluttered her fingers dismissively. “We had no contract.”

And that was the remorse Lana could expect to see. She had served Darth Arkous. This was nearly comparable. “You want reliability? I can deliver. My aim is to destroy Arcann and Vaylin.”

“Two very good aims,” murmured Scythia. “And when we have completed this goal we go our separate ways. No strings, no retribution.”

“For anything you and I have done in the interim?” Lana said sharply.

The corner of Scythia’s mouth twitched. “For any action taken to directly progress the quest. Satisfied?”

Hesitation was for the timid and the dying. “Yes.”

“I’m going to forward you to one of my droids. They report everything to me and, when primed with a small password I will provide, speak with my recorded voice. You’ll be dealing with them for most of your assignments.” Darth Scythia leaned forward and pushed an artful lock of black hair from her tattoo-dappled Mirialan face. “I know this disappoints you. But, Lord Beniko, you had your chance to speak with me face to face. You wasted it concocting your own destruction. You will find that I don’t give second chances.”

The holo cut out, to be replaced seconds later by a spindly humanoid droid with a long face and red eye-lights on either side like warning flares. “My lord,” it said. “If it please you, I have your assignment.”

*

The memory of Valkorion’s…marination…on Dromund Kaas still puddled in Ruth’s bones. She tried to ignore it when she reported to Tebbith on the day of the eclipse. He so much wanted to execute this ritual to cleanse the Dark Side from the haunted shadows of the room.

The rest of Ephel, well, that might be a taller order.

After some hesitation she decided to bring Rylon. “You won’t have to do much,” she said. “Only offer your power to Tebbith’s direction. I – good morning, Master Tebbith.”

“Madam Outlander.” He smiled and nodded. “Mr. Niral.”

“Larr,” said Ruth.

“Hey, kid,” said Larr Gith. “Wanna see a trick? We’re going to price your mom out of this neighborhood.”

“What does that even mean?” said Ruth.
The Jedi tossed her flawless golden hair. “Do I have to explain everything?”

The library was a vast room built of the same agglomeration of white crystals and brown flecks as the rest of the original temple. Shelves ringed all around, interspersed with smaller shelf series that Ruth realized were ladders. Lengthwise down the center stood two vast islands, similarly carved.

There was a small remote droid poking at datapads above Ruth’s head. Tebbith gently dismissed it, sounding as deferential to the droid as he did to people. Together the two Jedi and two Sith moved to the center of the room, between the islands, and knelt in a circle.

“This is a simple ritual,” said Tebbith, “but will require some effort. There is a malevolent will inside the library, ancient. I have been unable to speak with it. Under the circumstances, given the hundreds of innocents around us, I am not going to try. You are all masters of the Light Side, and you can support one another. Close your eyes and follow my lead. The eclipse is beginning…”

Ruth closed her eyes. She sank into a comfortable awareness of the Force around her. It was attenuated here, as though something else was trying to creep around it.

But she felt the others around her. Rylon, a puddle waiting to be given form. Larr Gith, a careless golden fountain. Tebbith, grounded, drawing himself in the center, then gently taking their inner selves and pouring them together…

The light smashed into her brain.

Not the light of a Force presence. A light so terrible it was almost physical. It was like twin spears in her eyes, ramming through to pierce the back of her skull…and keep going. On the way they grated against something inside her head, a small dark box, an imperfection, and they were twisting to grind every imperfection out…

Ruth opened her mouth. Her throat closed. If they stopped now she didn’t know what would happen. If they stopped now they all would know what a Dark Sider she really was.

Although…this box, it wasn’t hers originally. It was Valkorion’s.

She could not show them. She must not show them that he had made a part of her his, that her corruption had gone this deep. The pain of the light against that core was unbearable. She opened her mind. She supported the horrific torrent. She poured into the stream that was trying to scour away the center of her brain and possibly succeeding.

Again she tried to say something. Again the pain robbed her of voice.

“Wasting your energy on a home improvement project. You disappoint me, Ruth.”

The world had frozen when Valkorion stepped forward. The pain had not.

She screwed her eyes shut and whimpered against the agonizing prolongment of time. “Please, stop it.”

He willfully misinterpreted. He leaned closer to where she knelt and extended a hand cupping an imaginary boon. “Do you mean that?”

“No,” she snapped. “No.” The light battered at the inside of her skull, behind her eyes, down to her brain stem, scraping in a crazed hurry along the stain of her mind. “Go away.”

Valkorion made a fist and straightened. “You will need all your power to take the Eternal Throne.
Remember that when the next charity case comes your way. Remember also that I do have some power here. And this is but a taste of the consequence if you lose your way."

Time was barely passing. Her insides were screaming. “Let me go.”


The light redoubled. For a third time she tried to get her physical voice to do something and it wouldn’t. The circle around her was brilliant and pure and she was an irredeemable blemish on its edges. Didn’t everyone see that? Wouldn’t they drive her out?

Wouldn’t she thank them, for ending the pain?

The light roared, Larr Gith and Tebbith glowing strong and clear, Rylon joining his efforts to hers in nearly perfect simulacrum. She opened her mouth. She silently begged for the strength to get through this without being revealed for what she was: host to an infection, something fallen too far from the light to ever be worthy again.

Then she screamed.

The light roared, scouring her inside and out as part of a vast shock wave around her. Then, simply, it stopped. The Force returned to something calmer, less painful…and yet less shadowed. The brilliancy around her subsided. She let go. She breathed, and was a little surprised that she remembered how.

“Madam Outlander,” said Tebbith, his dark eyes haunted. “Ruth. Are you all right?”

“Mom?” Rylon said anxiously. “You were dark.”

“A part of me was dark. Not me. Never all of me. Understand?”

He stood up. “Yes, Mom.” He reached out to touch her shoulder. It was so simple a grounding, and so necessary.

“So…Captain Evil again,” said Larr Gith.

“I’m so sorry,” said Ruth. “Did you finish what you needed to do?”

“I stopped as soon as you cried out,” said Tebbith. “Although…I believe it reached a critical point there. How are you all feeling?”

“It’s not like Odessen,” said Rylon. “It’s like…Tython.”

Tebbith’s eyes widened. “What do you know of Tython?”

“Another time,” said Ruth. “Larr. How are you holding up?”

“Like I just got kicked in the head by somebody else’s ethical quandary. I’ll be fine.”

“The shadows aren’t crawling anymore,” said Rylon. “Do you feel it? Mom? Was it supposed to do that?”

Ruth closed her eyes again. The Light Side on her own terms was gentler, slower. It let her keep her secrets. “Are you sure you only cleansed the library?”
Everyone stood. Tebbith offered Ruth a hand. She swallowed hard and refused it. She was done admitting weakness.

“Come with me,” said Tebbith. “Let us see how the complex is faring.”

They passed out of the library and through the crowds of the halls, into the high draughty corridor beside the great hall.

“It’s changed,” said Ruth. “I don’t think your ritual was contained.”

“I didn’t expect it would have to be,” Tebbith said sheepishly. “Let’s go to the enclave.”

The grotto was to one side of the great hall, carved by water out of the vast stone highlands. Light filtered in through high slits and a river ran through. The shadows had all been wrong in that place from the beginning, but Sana-Rae had settled in with perfect equanimity.

Now she stood from a circle of meditating adepts. Rylon waved and she waved back, then approached them, smiling. Ruth would never really read her Voss features but she had a sweet smile. “Outlander,” she said. “You have wiped this place. Balance is left. This will be difficult to explain.”

“Are we amazing, or what?” said Larr Gith.

“I’ll talk to everyone if you want,” said Tebbith. “I just wanted to clean out the library.”

“Then you succeeded,” Sana-Rae said matter-of-factly. “Congratulations.”

“The eclipse isn’t over,” said Rylon, touching Ruth’s hand when he thought nobody would notice. “We could go see it.”

“Oh, I…”

“It’s part of this place’s history,” said Tebbith. “This place may not see another in half a century.”

“Briefly,” said Sana-Rae. She went back to the circle. “Friends. Will you come see the eclipse’s totality with me?”

Tebbith produced a box of goggles from just outside the door. Outside the grotto the river continued along a rugged path to a high green grove that promised cool breezes. People gathered on the mossy banks clear of the trees and looked up. The shadow passed over the green sun. A shining ring flared out around it. And, minutes later, a shaft of green light came back.

Nothing stayed suppressed for long. Whether that was comforting or not, Ruth wasn’t sure.

*

“A fascinating idea,” said Doctor Oggurobb. “Suppress the Force…or at least one’s experience of it…in a form factor more friendly than “underground ritual locus.” I have a few ideas already.”

The blonde Sith on the holo smiled. “Keep me apprised.”

The Hutt hesitated. “I’m afraid I can't do that, Lord Beniko. Not while you and Lord Niral are at odds.”
"I'm doing this for both of us."

"Which you can both explain to me together if you want. Keep me informed if knowledge itself matters to you. I look forward to seeing a team effort again."

*

"If there’s anything relevant," said Lana. "I can pay for your time and Ru-Baden’s."

Sana-Rae touched a fold of her robes. "You allied with the woman who bombed Odessen."

Lana’s little holo image arched an eyebrow. "Who told you that?"

"I see," said Sana-Rae. "I will not assist you. I see no future for you. But...I do not know everything."

*

"Right, and this little team is who, exactly? I’m not backing you solo against the Wrath."

"Major Pierce, my exact circumstances aren’t relevant. I can bring equal combat power to the Wrath."

"Great show, but you picked a fight with her directly. I know how those go."

"I’ll let you off the leash, Major. Real fights. Real tactics."

"From real traitors. Knew a man who did that once. It didn't work out. I think not, Beniko."

*

Torian had only one other person in the room during this holo conversation. Nobody needed to know his contract. But...

"My word was given to the Outlander. And there's no shortage of honorable battle here."

Lana Beniko looked...dangerous. "And if your Champion agrees?"

He widened the holo’s view to take in Calline. The Chiss shook her head, and flicked the holo off.

*

Lana leaned back in her ship’s rickety chair. Damn it, she was good at connections. No, she was superb at connections, at weaponizing loyalty and common cause. And yet the Alliance was closed to her.

She picked the least useful-looking panel on the bridge to punch before she went back to her quarters to meditate. This assignment was supposed to be a new path, not a dead end...and not a drain.

If they ever got in the same room, Lana and Scythia together could take a reconstructed Arcann or Vaylin. Lana had improved since her last duel with the maimed emperor; her prosthetic was as good as her flesh hand had ever been. A rematch would be welcome, but there was so much information, so much influence that was needed first.

Why had she ever let Ruth be the center for these things? She hadn’t wanted the exposure
herself…and now here she was, skulking in the shadows. Starting over again.

*

Wynston sipped. He could only really do that in private.

His room, one of the first private suites in the metallic expansion to the brown stone temple, felt empty. different tonight, somehow. There was nothing in the back of his head looking at him. Master Tebbith’s ritual to cleanse the temple? Maybe. When it came to feats of the mind his sense for the soft-spoken scholar was very vague.

There was so much to do. He almost felt better that he didn’t have someone wrapped around him all the time, stifling his movements, keeping him controlled and…dry.

Someone knocked.

He darted to hide the glass under the bed. He tested his breath on his wrist and decided he could just not let whoever it was near. “Come in,” he said casually.

It was Ruth. She smiled at him. “Tebbith accidentally purified the temple.”

“That was clumsy of him.” He waited for a beat and she didn’t go away. The drink would have to wait. “Won’t you come in?”

She walked in. “They finally forced you into a proper-sized apartment.”

“I’m not using eighty percent of this space,” he pointed at the high ceiling, “but I guess it looks better.” He looked around at the bare tile floor, the empty shelves, the unused tables. “I lost a few things in Odessen, trinkets. I wouldn’t know where to start restocking.”

“Is that what’s been bothering you?”

“I’m not bothered.”

She looked at him and smiled.

“I was just thinking about Lana,” he admitted.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t heard from her since she left.”

“She’s been spotted in the Core, killing someone who isn’t important enough to have a dossier. I don’t know why she did it. I don’t know what she’s doing. She will fight the Eternal Empire, I’m sure of that. Maybe she’s gone over to Acina. Maybe even to the Jedi. Some say Scythia, and…I’m having trouble believing it. You would think, if I loved her so much, I would be able to predict her.”

“It doesn’t always work that way.”

This was one of the few settings where he would allow his smile to turn melancholy. “No. I guess it doesn’t.”

“I feel bad that I’m happy in a galaxy where somebody betrayed you like that.”

He smiled until he felt like he was smiling, which took a few seconds. “Be happy. I want you to be
happy. I want you to be in love and I want you to spare me the details, at least for a little while.”

“I understand. I will.” She cast a look back at the door. “Honestly? Things are moving so fast out there. I know who I have to fight but I don’t know when or where or even how. Couple that with the voice in my head, and…”

“The voice in your head is there to tell you lies until it gets what it wants. You know that. I don’t think you’ll have any trouble disregarding it.”

She looked down. “Of course. Anyway. I just wanted to make sure the Light Side energy wasn’t disturbing the Imperial hairstyle.”

“You wound me, Sith.”

“Touché.” She smiled. “Take care. I’ll see you in ops.”

“See you.” He waited until she was gone, then got his drink. At least some things in this galaxy were nice. In the last ten minutes he’d gotten two of them.

*

“Theron, have you been sleeping well?”

Ruth was sprawled over half the bed, partly under the covers, while Theron took one edge and a corner. She slid a hand out to touch Theron’s back. It was lightning on his skin, the nice kind. It always was.

He rolled to face her. “Mostly,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“This. That. Running this thing. I’ll be fine.”

“I realize a lot of this effort is kind of mindless right now…”

“No, not really.”

She reached in the dark to touch his side. “Then what’s wrong?”

“Middle of the night thoughts. Nothing important.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“Can I ask you something really impolite?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Are Force-blinds a thing for you?”

“A…thing.”

“You know what I mean. Every ex of yours I’ve met, same deal.”

“Maybe I’ve never trusted a Force-sensitive enough. I mean, I did, once. He died.”
“Jeez. Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“You don’t know anything about Korriban. By design. I was young and stupid anyway. Maybe I do prefer Force-blinds. Intellectually I know you know six ways to kill me from where we are, but on some level you’re not as terrible as me.”

More like four given available tools, thought Theron. “I didn’t mean to dredge things up. This probably wasn’t the best line of questioning for not being awake and dressed.”

“Theron.” She caught his hand and kissed it, mouth light and dry and warm. “I don’t fall in love with your capabilities, the boxes you check or the caste you’re born to. I fell in love with you. And if there were three Force-blinds in a row, well, maybe they were the three that could see more than a Sith in me.” She paused. “Quinn excepted.”

“Quinn excepted,” he agreed gently, sensing that she needed it to be gentle. “Ever think you’ll meet a Sith, or a really bad Jedi, who does fill in the rest of the boxes?”

“We can invite him to our wedding. I’m sure the conversation will be fascinating.”

“Think so?”

“Well. Probably not as fascinating as you.”

“I think I’ve mentioned that thing where I was supposed to be Force-sensitive. It kind of ruined a lot of plans when I wasn’t.”

“Hm.” Her hand started moving. She trailed fingertips up to his face and started tracing around. “No, still perfect. I can check in better lighting if you want to be sure.”

“Don’t you go anywhere.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Anything else on your mind?”

“Just you.”

“You know I’ve wondered about the other side. Does it bother you that there can’t be a fair fight between us?”

“Don’t joke about that.”

“I wasn’t, beloved. Believe me, I know we can handle anything together...I know you could handle anything with or without me...but the theoretical capability is still there.”

That she could kill him with a gesture and all that stopped her was something called love? “No. It doesn’t bother me.” Her threats were highly directional and her kindnesses weren’t. It made the latter a lot easier to get hit by.

She nuzzled forward, hitting his neck and working her way up, restarting his breathing on the way. “I. Will. Never. Harm. You. We are equals in this, because this, what we have, it’s bigger than power differentials, and it’ll last when those crumble.” She ended by kissing his nose. “There, did I make your night thoughts any worse?”

“Nah.” He kissed her, trying to relax into the moment and mostly succeeding. “But I’m taking back half the bed.”

*
Music was playing low and gentle in the Force enclave. Rylon floated in white light, content, ready for whatever might occur.

It slammed him so hard his cheek rebounded off the stone floor.

He scrambled to his feet. “Sana-Rae,” he said. “Sana-Rae! Master!”

“What is it, Rylon?”

“I had, had a vision. My mother. Killing a scarred man. She’ll never come home. The darkness will get her.”

Sana-Rae looked at him with those speckled eyes. Then, gently, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, drawing him against her crisp fragrant robes. “Be at peace, Rylon. What you have seen has not happened yet. Come, let us speak with Ru-Baden. He will help you understand what you saw.”

The second Voss of Ephel was seated in a corner, reading a datapad. He looked up and joined his fingertips in front of his chest to bow from his seat. “Rylon. What brings you to me today?”

“I h-had a vision,” said Rylon. “I don’t know if I did it right. It hit me.”

“It can be difficult to maintain physical control at first,” Sana-Rae said gently. “What did you see?”

“My mother. She was standing over a man who was all scars, I couldn’t see his face. She killed him, and this d-dark, thing, took her. I don’t know where she went. I don’t know where she is. Is she-?”

Ru-Baden shook his head. “It is unlikely that what you saw is coming to pass now. Don’t be afraid. Take my hand in yours. Squeeze. Think about what you saw.” Ru-Baden’s other hand came to rest on Rylon’s forehead. “See.”

The vision surged back, the darkness shouting over even the music of the room he was physically in. He stumbled back, gagging. “She has to not kill him.”

“If she does,” Ru-Baden said solemnly, “then a great power will take her. That is the darkness you see. It will take her from the homeworld you have seen and she will be lost. She must not kill the scarred man, that much is clear.”

“But a scarred man on a homeworld?” said Sana-Rae. “This has already come to pass. The Outlander spared the scarred prince on Voss. This dark power was avoided. All will be well.”

“You mean I saw something that already didn’t happen?” said Rylon. “What’s the point of that?”

“A Mystic knows the future. A Mystic must know the past. All of history is connected. Here? Your mother resisted a great evil. You were meant to know, and now you do.”

Mom came in just then. She was much shorter than the two Voss. She looked to Sana-Rae first. “You called?”

“Your son has had a vision,” said Sana-Rae. It really was hard to stay panicked while she stood there, so calm. And while Mom stood there, so completely ready to redecorate the room in wreckage when necessary. He had never seen her do so, but he knew she could.

“Rylon?” she said. “Are you all right?”
He nodded. He didn’t really want to be seen clinging to anyone just that moment, so he stayed still and waited for one of the Voss to speak.

And Ru-Baden did, giving a summary of his interpretation.

Ruth nodded. “You’re making my son see these things?”

“It is his own discipline,” said Sana-Rae.

“He’s too young to be looking at what I do out there. This has to stop.”

“It was going to hurt you, Mom.”

“Rylon. Dear Rylon.” She stooped to face him. “There will come a time when you have to defend yourself, and maybe me. But that time is not when you are eleven years old. Do you understand?”

“I want to see. We can’t even trust Father, I have to see.”

“Your father will never threaten you. I meant that and I mean it now. You know I didn’t go to Korriban Academy until I was eighteen? Do you know why?”

He gave this serious consideration. “Were you slow?”

Oddly, she smiled. “Only in some ways,” she murmured. “My father didn’t want me to have to fight for my life when I was a child. I learned my defenses. I grew up. Then I went out into the world. There will be time for this for you.”

“Really?”

Suddenly she stopped looking at him. She swallowed hard and straightened. “Can’t you filter these?” we said quietly.

“The will of the Force is its own,” said Sana-Rae.

“He’s too young.”

“He is strong.”

“Of course my child is strong. But he’s a child. Rylon.” She looked back to him. “Did it hurt?”

“No,” he lied. “It’s okay. I’ll try not to get any more.” He did mean it, at least for a little while.

She touched his hair. The corners of her mouth went back to that resting turn-up that meant she wasn’t mad. “Very well. Sana-Rae. Ru-Baden. Rylon, I may be a little late for supper. Wait for me.” And she didn’t turn away, nor stop looking at him, until he said “Okay.”

Then the hall shrank, the way it always did when Mom left a room. The music was back. And Rylon saw no further nightmares that day.
The Path to Power

Chapter Summary

Action.


Ruth met Vaylin on the Gravestone. Which was annoying on several levels.

“Why are we not putting the Gravestone in dry dock and copying its every detail?” said Ruth in the fast vessel they’d taken to where Koth and the Gravestone had issued a distress signal.

“Because we need it too much in the field,” said Wynston. He had been very serious lately.

“Maybe do just the part that goes boom?” Ruth tried.

“An admirable sentiment, but, we need it.”

Koth was surrounded by the Eternal Fleet. He was anxious but professional; Ruth didn’t ask him about his latest outing and he didn’t volunteer it. It was an odd silence, but not a dealbreaker.

She had a few Mandalorians along for the expedition. Together they fought through boarding droids to the bridge. SCORPIO was nowhere to be seen. Vaylin, finally on the move, very much was.

“There you are,” said the Eternal Empress. “I was just getting the fleet ready to crush you.”

Ruth cautioned her allies back. “So open fire,” she said loudly, sparing no time to meditate on the ships in the viewport. “Unless you’re afraid?”

“No no, they don’t get to kill you. I do,” she snarled, and charged.

This was nothing about sparring, testing, circling. This was short vicious bursts in every direction at once, not so much misdirection as the unbridled exercise of a speed no Force-blind could match. Ruth swung, blocked, countered, slashed, meeting Vaylin’s fury with something a little less controlled than her usual elegance. Style was death. Speed and power were her only way through.

Vaylin started an overhead swing that left her vulnerable. Just then, the world greyed and shifted. Valkorion stepped forward.

“What do you want?” gritted Ruth.

“Father,” cooed Vaylin. Her movement in the slowed timestream chilled Ruth to the core. “I
wondered if you would come out to play. If I slice open her skull, do you think you can crawl the rest of the way out?"

"I could help you," said Valkorion to Ruth. And, more wheedling, "From here you require only the smallest advantage."

"Not on your life," said Ruth. "Or death."

"What, you don’t want an ancient lich lord in your head?" Vaylin sneered. "My power may have been trammeled by Father, but I was never that pathetic."

"You had grown too uncontrollable," said Valkorion. "You were a danger to yourself and others. I made you safe."

"You feared what I would become…and you were right."

"To which I will add only this: Kneel before the dragon of Zakuul."

Time stuttered forward. Vaylin screamed…and lowered her saber. Valkorion extended a hand to trace her as she fell to her knees.

"Kneel," he said, and let his hand fall. "Did you think I locked you away all those years ago to punish you? No, you had to learn. You had to be…conditioned."

Ruth watched, ready for the killing blow and increasingly realizing this scene wouldn’t let her make it. "What did you do to me?" caterwauled Vaylin.

"If you fight, you will die."

Time closed in with its irresistible speed. Vaylin sprinted. Ruth found herself on an empty bridge. She raced to join the others: with SCORPIO somewhere on the vessel, there was no safe place.

She found Koth and Wynston messing with power cables around the corner from the docking ring for their own ship. Wynston finished doing something at boot level and looked up at her. "No sign of SCORPIO or Vaylin," he said.

"Oh. I got signs."

"Is the ship compromised?"

"They’ve fled. Although, the Eternal Fleet escort blew out, so all we have to do is leave."

Koth stumbled up to the bridge and looked at the empty sky. "Vaylin got away. She got away! How come you let them get away?"

He didn’t just mean Vaylin. Or SCORPIO. "Because I am not yet omnipotent," said Ruth. "If that doesn’t meet with your approval, perhaps you can hire a different champion."

"I guess I should be grateful Thexan’s not alive for you to set loose," he growled. "Make it three for three."

"Get out." Wynston was looking up now, red eyes concerned. Koth was shying away. "Not right this minute," she said, rolling her eyes. "But this ship is mine, and you are neither requested nor required on Ephel."

She tried to set a course for home. The Gravestone, however, flickered a model of SCORPIO and
entered something else into the navicomputer.

“Damn,” said Ruth, and the ship jumped to hyperspace.

*

The Gravestone was a still point in the tedious current of hyperspace. Wynston caught Ruth’s eye and tilted his head toward the tiny briefing room off the bridge.

She nodded. “Koth,” she said reluctantly, “the bridge is yours.” She followed Wynston in.

He shut the door and listened at the edge to get a feel for soundproofing. The place was relatively secure. He made a circuit of the consoles to make sure they were powered down.

“Wynston?” said Ruth, arching her eyebrows. “Is it that bad?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. I’m struggling to sort out why Vaylin would turn tail and run,” said Wynston. “That doesn’t fit her profile so far.”

“Her profile so far never involved hitting someone who was nearly a match for her.”

He looked her over and tried not to make that a naked evaluation. “Nearly?”

“Valkorion helped,” said Ruth. “He spoke a, a key phrase, that stopped her from attacking me. She ran away rather than get cut down.”

Wynston’s brain, after knocking hard for a few seconds, got through. “A phrase?” he said, unbelieving. “Is that permanent?” he added pointedly.

“I don’t think so,” said Ruth. “But it probably hasn’t gone away yet. I could still use it.”

“Don’t.” Castellan restraints. Here. From Zakuul. He had crushed the program in one civilization only to find it in another, applied to the highest levels of…of whatever the hell Vaylin was. “I… request.”

“Why? This is the advantage I might need to stop her.”

Wynston checked the door again. He thought about the flask in his boot and whether he could get her out of the room long enough to bring it to bear. Not the point, he reminded himself sharply. “Ruth, it’s obscene. I should know. I was conditioned the same way.”

She was horrified at the exact same time she was surprised. There was no layering of intended and appropriate reactions. “Wynston, how…?”

“I never explained Quesh.”

She scanned his face over and over until she nodded. “The chem lab you asked me to guard. Before you injected that chemical cocktail, you said ‘I want my mind back.’”

“You remembered,” he said, sounding surprised.

“Who did that to you?”

“Intelligence, under direction from the Dark Council. I was deemed too dangerous to be let free.
Sound familiar?”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize…”

“It wouldn’t have been an issue, but Republic agents got that keyword. They used it. Over, and over, and over. For things I’d rather not repeat. Ruth, use that keyword sparingly. Don’t use it if you can avoid it. I won’t. And don’t. Share it.”

“She’s too powerful for you. If it’s the difference between life and death?”

Every conversation a fight, every advantage a potential lifesaver. Wasn’t that always the way? “Then I sell out. Maybe I sell her out to all of us. Maybe I can’t afford illusions. But, Ruth, if she found out about this conditioning, she will stop at nothing to have it undone. Just as I didn’t. We need to understand how it happened if we want to know where she’s going next.”

“Do you have any other advice?”

Did this change anything about the homicidal empress? Maybe not. Just made it more urgent. “Kill her. I believe that, in the absence of immediate hope, we would have found it preferable.”

*

Through a series of inconvenient events Ruth and several allies ended up on a strange laboratory of a planet, which would not be notable except for one thing: everyone who arrived on that planet was knocked out and dragged to the surface to be placed in a prison. Including SCORPIO.

Wynston looked at the holo with the tiny contingent of prisoners who had reached communication devices. He scoffed. “SCORPIO. Stuck on a prison planet inside the walls.”

“I am not trapped. Merely inconvenienced. I will not always be.”

Wynston snorted. He chortled. “Excuse me for a minute.” He leaned on the wall and laughed. Then he bent further and laughed harder. “Oh sweet stars please, please let me remember this moment.”

“I am still capable of maintaining grudges,” SCORPIO said sourly.

Wynston snickered. “Aren’t we all? Do we have some droid-altering gas we can throw into the party? I recall she liked that one. Or should I wipe out her life signs to avoid security? No, no, that doesn’t work on droids, either. It’s really not that similar, SCORPIO. I can’t pay back to you what you did to me and my people. But I will enjoy my front-row ticket if something does it for me.”

“Lest you think you are capable of beginning to…”

“I know when to ignore a woman’s idea of my competence, SCORPIO. Beauty before age, that’s what you always resented about me.”

“Among other things.”

“Are you all right?” Ruth said dubiously.

“Honestly, I can’t remember a time I felt better. When we get to her she’s being eaten by mynocks.”
“We don’t have any mynocks.”

“We’ll buy some.” He flicked his vibroknife out, flourished it, and put it back. “Shall we?”

*

“You came back,” said Tebbith.

Koth grinned. “I told you I would. Well, I told somebody I would. Word did get around, didn’t it?”

“The Outlander and her staff have come to rely on you. This Alliance has.”

“I’m just one guy. I know how to fly ships, keep crews in shape, and shoot things. Given the choice I would put down my blaster and just pilot things where they need to go. But this reality needs blasters. So I have one. That’s just math. But…it’s nothing special.”

“Your strength of character is not the kind of thing one stumbles across every day.”

Koth looked thoughtful. “Can I tell you something?”

“Anything.”

“You know you talk like you mean that? I…well, there it is. I’m staying for you.”

“I’m glad my negotiations…”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Tebbith hesitated. “You honor me,” he said dubiously.

“Is that all we’re doing?”

Koth was getting closer. Tebbith panicked. “I am a Jedi,” he reminded himself out loud. “W-we must n-not– attachments–”

“Slow down,” said the Human. He seemed very calm. “I’m not here to destroy your worldview. Tweak it a little, maybe. I wouldn’t have said anything, only, you look at me differently. And I have to say, I am dying to know what that means.”

“It means I can’t look away,” Tebbith admitted. “No more and no less.”

“No less.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Look, I’m not asking you to do anything you can’t handle. Do you believe that?”

“I do.”

“Okay.” He raised a hand to Tebbith’s cheek. The contact was dry and shockingly warm. “Okay so far?”

Tebbith frantically checked that he was remembering to breathe. “Yes,” he said, leaning in.

Koth kissed him. Tebbith had guiltily tried rehearsal lately, wrapping his forefinger around his thumb joint and mashing or sucking the loop it formed, but that hadn’t been right at all. This was warm and unfamiliar and very brief. “How about now?”
Tebbith searched Koth’s dark eyes for something to hold on to and thought that, if he only got a little closer, he would find it. “That would be my first time.”

“Oh. Wow. I should give you some kind of basis for comparison. You know, in the interest of more complete knowledge.”

“Yes.” There were arguments against this kind of thing, high roads he had taken without so much as a bump on the way past many and many a temptation. Those roads seemed so distant now. He lowered his voice, enough so that surely nobody over the span of the galaxy could hear the Barsen’thor falling. “Please, kiss me.”

*  

For weeks, intelligence was in flux.

Vaylin was here. Arcann was there. The Eternal Fleet under independent GEMINI units had disbanded. The Eternal Fleet under mind-wiped GEMINI units was knocking down settlements as fast as its hyperdrives could propel it. The Republic was mounting a rescue operation for former Chancellor Saresh. The Republic had sent a discreet thank-you note with an earnest plea for future support. The Empire was getting hammered by the Eternal Fleet. The Empire was riding a boost of energy from its alliance with Ruth to new heights of strength and prosperity. Lana was in the Republic’s employ. Lana was cutting a swath through the underworld on her own errand.

Theron teased the name Indo Zal out.

He was an attendant on Zakuul, seemingly eager to betray his empress. He introduced himself boldly on holo and Theron nodded approval, which was good enough for Ruth. “Vaylin is a plague on the good people of Zakuul,” said the little man. “But if we work together, we can remove her from power and end this blasted war.”

“I’m listening,” said Ruth. “How do you get Vaylin to a specified place at a specified time?”

“She’ll do it for us! Vaylin is throwing a party on Zakuul to celebrate her glory. The guest list is exclusive, but I’ll secure invitations, disguises, everything you’ll need to infiltrate the party and overthrow the Empress.”

He made it sound so simple, and everyone else was nodding along. Ruth couldn’t. “Vaylin can sense me. We’re going to need a distraction.”

“Oh,” he laughed nervously. “I have one in mind.”

*  

“Here it is,” said Darth Scythia. “My inner circle, population you and me.”

Darth Scythia’s personal vessel was odd. It had clearly been taken from Imperial Intelligence, some prototype that had done well in tests. It was plated in streamlined black tiles with engine signatures in a chemical green. Inside the décor was light grey streaked with deep green, brighter overall than Lana would have expected. The furnishings were sleek and rounded and ridiculously comfortable.

“What’s next?” said Lana.

Up in the bridge a silent cyborg piloted toward Zakuul. A droid stood by the wall, awaiting
someone’s word. What a fate.

The holo to one side of the…lounge…was vast, dotted with devices whose purpose Lana couldn’t ascertain. At the moment the projector was showing the view out the bridge’s viewport: hyperspace, pale and restless.

“Darth Scythia,” said Lana.

“Hmm?”

“Have you considered joining forces with the Outlander?”

“Mm. No. I’ll use her little friend on Zakuul, but her? No. For one thing she lacks the will to close, as you well know.”

“And for another thing?”

Scythia set green eyes on hyperspace and Lana saw it reflected in duplicate. “I have nothing against her personally, but Ruth Niral is an anarchist. She is an agent of chaos following no coherent plan. She sows the wind and is surprised when she is obliged to reap the whirlwind. I do not hate Ruth Niral, and in fact someday she may be a great figurehead, but she cannot be trusted.”

Lana thought about it. “She has friends.”

Scythia looked puzzled. “And?”

“I never had that before I met her. I had working relationships, of course, but I didn't trust them. We would conclude our business and go our separate ways. Theron ruined that, but Ruth...she ran it into the ground and stomped on the wreckage. She has friends who would fight and die for her.”

Scythia turned her full emerald attention on Lana. “Like you?” she said silkily.

“Not anymore.” That bridge had been burned for the good of the mission. Nothing Scythia had said was false. “You're right. She can't be trusted.”

“There is one more detail before we reach Zakuul.”

“Oh?”

“I have faith in our arrangement to destroy Arcann and Vaylin and then maintain a truce. I have faith, but faith should always have a concrete basis. Your Wynston has proven hard to track.”

Good, thought Lana. “But Theron Shan, your friend. He has a long career as a Republic spy. It’s amazing what you can glean from public and less public records. It’s amazing, the dossier you can build on a man’s deeds and misdeeds. Technoplague has made many enemies. I can guarantee they never get a word out of me regarding his whereabouts so long as our deal holds.”

Scythia’s eye for weak points would have been a virtue in a less psychopathic manifestation. “Was that really necessary? First Odessen, now this. Must you burn down anything that fails to meet your standards?”

Scythia looked thoughtful. “Yes and yes,” she said. “You’re moderately clever and pleasingly sneaky, Beniko, but when I bring you to fight Vaylin, it’s your lightsaber I want. Shall we?”
Ruth dressed as a Zakuulian Knight, flanked by Wynston and the taller Calline. With the keyword in hand Ruth felt she could do without other Force users, and she did not intend to let Ephel be caught without protection like its predecessor.

T7-01 and Theron crept to a public console and started slicing to get information on the grand pavilion’s systems and inhabitants. Indo had found Theron an incredibly unflattering city’s staff uniform. T7-01 could, it was assumed, beep his way out of any trouble.

Indo, master of revelry, met Ruth’s trio in a high vestibule near the imperial palace. “Friends! Welcome to this celebration of our Empress Vaylin’s majesty!”

Ruth pointed at a large clear pen sticking out from around the corner. “Who are these people?”

“These are friends of mine,” Indo said, *sotto voce*. “Rebels, here to be publicly executed. If you free them they’ll fight for you.” He held up two tightly packed bandoliers of little golden domes.

“Ion charges,” muttered Calline, sounding intrigued. “Here.” She took one.

“With careful placement they could cut everything but the Holonet drone transmitters, leaving Vaylin sans prisoners, sans shock collars, sans consoles, and sans light. Party over.”

“Got it,” said Calline. “Wynston. Take south?”

“Certainly,” said Wynston. They nodded smartly at one another and scattered. Every now and then, thought Ruth, they did look like brother and sister.

No one asked a lonely Zakuulian knight what she was doing wandering around. Ruth just had to keep her posture straight and keep her eyes open. There was a vast balcony above the level of the imprisoned rebels. Ruth checked that Wynston and Calline were still at work, then marched up the stairs to take up a station by a potted plant: not very Knightlike, but reasonably private. Where the hell was Indo’s distraction? She looked to the railing festooned with Holonet camera drones. It was here that Vaylin would start talking.

And oh, did she start talking.

Vaylin was striking in black, small but upright, giving off waves of bitterness as she sneered at the cameras. “Zakuul!” she announced, and didn’t wait for anyone to quiet down. “My Empire! The Alliance tried to destroy me, but I ground them to dust. Now the Outlander hides in fear, as my fleet rips through the galaxy. I am the wrath of the dragon’s fire. I am your Eternal Empress! Today we celebrate the Eternal Empire’s strength, and watch our enemies suffer. The rebels who spit on Izax…and the worm who betrayed me.”

Ruth stiffened. Indo Zal in a shock collar staggered forward into the pen of prisoners.

“They deserve an eternity of torment,” shouted Vaylin, producing a collar controller. “And no one, not even the Outlander, can save them.”

“Guys,” muttered Ruth.

“Done,” whispered Wynston in her ear. There was a rippling series of popping noises around the entire facility. The collars that had started sparking stopped. Consoles hummed down. The forcefield separating facility from the Zakuulian knight fluttered into nothing. The lights flared and died. Ruth took her sabers from their hiding place and ran.

Then the distraction came. Lana Beniko and Darth Scythia charged out of hiding.
Ruth tried to get her breath back while running. Vaylin whirled. “Father,” she spat, and reached out to seize a giant panel from the wall. She swept it across the scene, sending Ruth staggering, knocking Lana to the ground.

Darth Scythia waved. The panel shuddered and slowed. Scythia stepped delicately around it. “Yes?” she said sweetly.

“Who are you? Insect! I will not be toyed with by Sith rabble!” Vaylin tore down another panel, swinging it like a comically oversized bat.

“Ruth, look out!” Theron’s voice ripped through Ruth’s concentration. He was afraid. “Shuttle coming in firing!”

The missile hit the side of the building seconds later.

Ruth flung her lightsaber in a broad arc at Vaylin. The empress jumped to dodge and hurled a clump of floor tiles back. Scythia and Lana appeared to be running for cover.

The little shuttle was hovering over the park outside and firing indiscriminately into the facility, the vast atrium, the high balcony, the slave pen, all of it. Ruth could tell from where she stood. The man who disembarked was Arcann, cybernetic arm gleaming, more whole than he had been in the sickbed of Voss where they’d last met.

“Yes!” sang Scythia, and raised her hands to fling Force lightning at Vaylin. Vaylin snarled, spun, and leaped down to face her brother in the park outside the ruined forcefield.

The new party started running: Ruth, Lana, Scythia, joined by Wynston and Calline on their way down the stairs.

“Talk to me,” said Theron. “You okay?”

“The shuttle’s stopped firing,” said Ruth. “We’re outside now. Arcann’s on the scene.”

“You couldn’t have started with that?”

“I’ll be okay. Monitor our location, we might need a quick exit.” She kept running. There were conversations to be had with the woman who had tried to eject her from power and the woman who had ravaged her adoptive home, but none of that mattered next to the pair of Zakuulian royals they were chasing.

They reached Arcann and Vaylin while the two were battling near the edge of a steep drop. Vaylin spared a hand to point at the five closing in. “They’re here for us,” she cooed. She jumped off the edge, leaving Arcann. Seconds later she rose on a speeder and raced into the night.

Arcann turned around. “Outlander. I should’ve known Father would bring you here. You invaded my empire, killed my mother…I will have revenge.”

“I tried to save your mother,” said Ruth. “Do you remember Voss?”

“Silence!” roared Arcann.

It was a hopeless fight. Scythia’s Force lightning, Ruth’s saber work, Lana’s kinetic attacks…he was a powerful man with extensive training and the best upgrades an empire could buy, but he was only one man.
Scythia’s Force attack seized his leg, jerking him to one knee. Ruth cautioned the other two back. Her mind raced. Then it raced into a blur in the foreground, an aching clarity in the background. “My son, at last,” said Valkorion. “You will not allow him to escape this time.”

“There might still be a way to heal his anger,” said Ruth. He had done so much, but she had seen him delivered to a place of healing. It might have worked. “Senya believed it.”

“A mother’s folly. A fool’s errand and one you would not survive. Come, now. Beat him down. Let us end this.”

Arcann surged up and swung. Ruth blocked and hilt-whipped him back to his knees.

“Is it that you find this difficult? Let me transfigure you…”

“No,” she said. “You would only kill him.”

“That is his only fate.”

“He had hope, once. I could find it again.”

“Let me turn you…”

“For his mother’s sake. I will–”

“No, you will not,” Valkorion snarled, and made a fist. Violet power crackled out and wrapped around her vision. She felt time juddering painfully into motion again and felt her hands raise, sabers glistening.

“No,” she whispered. “No. I will kill you for this.”

“Excellent sentiment. But he stands in your way.” The purple intensified, drew closer around her, buzzing in her head and down her nerve-shredded body. “Now do it.”

“No!” She tried to force her voice into the waking world and only made it echo in the grey-toned distant clarity of time’s slowing. “There is still hope for you.”

“No there isn’t…Father,” said Arcann, and she was a little grateful that he understood, because she would never understand the next five seconds.

Valkorion intoned his words almost ritualistically. “The path to power…” Her sabers slashed down. Arcann fell. “…is not for the faint of heart.”

Ruth’s arms went numb, hanging. “He was your son!” she shrieked.

“Someday power may ask as much of you.”

“I don’t want that power!”

The violet energy crackled around his hand and her throat, trying to thrill and succeeding only in crawling. “I do.” Then, suddenly, he staggered sideways, looking for a moment genuinely scared, and vanished into nothing. Time stayed stretched a moment longer; then he was gone, more completely than he ever had been.

Ruth set her hands on her knees and sagged. She barely felt like herself. She wasn’t sure she was herself.
The battlefield burned unheeded.

---- end of Book 4: Always in Motion
Beginnings

Chapter Summary

Beginnings. (Vette, Wynston, Malavai Quinn, Kaliyo Djannis, Jaesa Willsaam, Lieutenant Pierce, Emperor Valkorion, Darth Scythia, Darth Marr, Lana Beniko, Larr Gith, Prince Arcann, Princess Vaylin, T7-01, Koth Vortena, SCORPIO, Senya Tirall, Bey’wan Aygo, Sana-Rae, Hylo Visz, Doctor Ogurobb, Tebbith, Yuun, Xalek, Satele Shan, Gault Rennow, Aric Jorgan, Torian Cadera, Major Fade, M1-4X, Virinos Geth, Ashara Zavros, Ru-Baden, Calline, T5-M7, Empress Acina, Leontyne Saresh, Rylon Niral, Theron Shan)

cw: a moment of blaster violence in the first section. Skip to Wynston to avoid.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the most fun I’ve had writing in weeks.

Vette stood in the jail cage, watching with interest. A young doll-faced Sith was deciding the fate of fellow prisoners under the jaundiced eye of the jailer, who was an unmitigated asshole.

Apparently Vette wasn’t on the board today. She tried not to hold that against anyone. Instead she watched. The Sith was speaking to a battered Neimoidian. He was protesting his innocence in rapid if accented Huttese. Not what Imps liked to hear, but hey, no one asked her for advice.

The Sith studied his bleeding wrists and bruised neck. She listened. “You did nothing wrong,” she said softly. “I’ll see that you’re freed.”

Vette watched, slack-jawed, as the Sith hit the cage control. The alien stumbled and bowed before her.

And the jailer drew a blaster and shot him in the back of the head, dropping him in one fleshy thud. The Sith’s face was white horror. The jailer grinned. “He’s seen our facilities and methods. It’s plain stupid to let him go. And I have your master’s approval on that. Still, I’ll tell him what you did.”

Vette changed her mind about wanting the new Sith’s attention. The Sith’s lips quivered for just a moment as she looked at the dead prisoner. Then she scowled at the jailer and clenched a fist. The jailer’s blaster sparked and crumpled. “I think that’s all,” she said in a strained voice, and raised her chin unconvincingly, and got out of there.

A stranger and a Sith; still, after seeing that look on her face, Vette almost felt sorry for her.

*
Wynston clutched his stealth field generator when he saw the Human emerge from between pillars. Very young, pretty, carrying two lightsaber hilts. Looking, and packing a punch, like that, he had no doubt she was used to doing whatever she wanted to whomever she wanted. He clamped down on his emotions and kept going. He had a terrorist to catch, and fast. The Dark Temple drove people crazy. He didn’t want to be here to witness it, especially not via somebody carrying weaponry like that.

Damnably enough, she stalked straight toward him and raised one inactive saber. “Who goes there?”

He dropped the stealth field and straightened to face her, keeping his eyes on her face and not her weapons, bracing himself for whatever crazed Sith demand she might make. He could at least try to defuse it…

“Are you all right?” they said.

Her blue eyes widened and she lowered her still-unlit weapon. “I’m fine,” she said softly, the gentleness of it as surprising and engaging as her own decidedly un-Sithly expression of concern. It was hard to tell whether that was a smile or just some natural turn of her full pink lips.

He would love to find out, though.

**

Quinn turned away from the stumbling of the underperforming underling. He turned to see a woman. The woman he had been told to expect.

She walked with an even, balanced gait, and she wore formfitting black, and her eyes were wide and blue and staggeringly…light? Like she wasn’t participating in grimy reality. Consistent with her psychological profile. And yet her lightsabers at her hard-planed hips looked serious and, after all, you learned to humor a Sith’s worldview if you knew what was good for you.

Balmorra was effectively exile from the galactic stage's big opportunities and colleagues of passable competence. Was her coming a punishment for her, or an opportunity for him? He would do anything to make it the latter. Played right, Ruth Niral would get him much, much further than the next entry in his tedious inbox.

She looked at him with something like eagerness, as though delighted that he was here to greet her. He wouldn’t presume to know the reasoning behind that. “My lord,” he said, and bowed. Establish the balance of power early. In his experience, nobody disliked that.

***

The casino lounge was boringly quiet and kind of dark. Kaliyo followed “Darnek” to a booth where two women were already sitting: a skinny doll-faced Human in black and a skinnier Twi’lek in blue. All the introductions were fake, presumably, except Ruth Niral, who was almost certainly using her real name. Kaliyo smiled at her and she smiled vacantly back. “Darnek” was 100% going to be fucking her by this time tomorrow. Kaliyo wondered whether she knew it yet.

"Darnek” could make an acklay partner look good on the dance floor, three left feet and all, but he seemed to be in extra fine form with the starry-eyed Sith. But Kaliyo knew he needed a little beast in his beauty. Poor kid. It made Kaliyo want to bang him where Ruth could watch. She might learn a thing or ten.

Trust Wynston to meet a Sith and say "Hey, let's have sex." Probably made him feel all important
in his gonads. Enjoy it while it lasts, Agent. You and me, we'll be gone by Friday. Notch the bedpost and move on.

****

Jaesa paced through the drab metal halls of the Hutta…bunker? She sensed the disturbance in the Force before she reached the big room where the Sith stood.

Jaesa stopped in the doorway, unwilling to get too close to that radiant presence bundled in lean black armor. “Sith. I have come.” Jaesa’s Jedi master Nomen Karr sat bound to a chair. His face looked haggard and splotched, and he rocked and seethed. The Sith’s trick, no doubt. “Release Master Karr. Your efforts to draw me out have been a success.”

Nomen Karr bared his teeth. “Jaesa, no! I told you to stay put! How dare you defy me!”

“Your master is upset,” the fresh-faced Sith said dryly. “But I think our face to face was long overdue.”

Jaesa stared at Nomen Karr’s snarl. “What have you done to him?”

“I showed him who he is. Jedi don’t take well to mirrors, it turns out.”

“You–!” Jaesa forced her gaze back to the perpetrator. “You have terrorized my friends and family. Slashed your way across worlds.”

“I know.” And yet she didn’t carry the rage of her own master. In fact she might well have been the calmest person in the room. It was mesmerizing. The Sith reached out with one small gloved hand. “Come with me.”

*****

The conference room was disgustingly hot and the Sith hadn’t shown up yet. Pierce left the Moff and headed out to the relative cool of the Taris night.

Another pack of rakghouls was piling through the toxic waste and scrabbling up onto the metal catwalk that connected the base to the spaceport road. Vermin. He brought up his rifle.

Two red lightsabers lit in the middle distance. The fighter was small and dark and efficient, swinging and slaying rakghoul after rakghoul. He kept his eye over his sight as he walked up to reinforce.

The last one broke to sprint straight at him. On instinct he didn’t fire. Two lightsabers crossed to cut an X clear through the careening monster’s body. The parts fell aside. The Sith came to rest in a low, dynamic pose, and looked up at him.

“Lieutenant,” she said in that cool hard voice that he would forever choose to believe was her real one. “Ruth Niral. And you are?”

******

The Emperor had seen Ruth Niral drifting through the corridors of power for some time. Now, as his Voice stood trapped by the malevolent entity of Voss, he understood that he had chosen wisely. Her body was only relevant for its strength, her mind only for its malleability, her heart…ah, that heart was rich in fears, and fears could be cultivated. She required only a little hatred to be perfectly suitable.
“Wrath,” he said. “Come to me. I am your Emperor.”

She came close, and knelt. Her power shone to his senses, eclipsing the rabble she had walked in with. Yes. Granted only a little hate she would be a magnificent weapon. His finest yet.

*******

“So,” the supposed Emperor’s Wrath said in hard clipped tones. She was in black and red, pale-faced and grim, as she planted herself in Jora Mei’s favored cantina on Corellia. “You want me to kill that Lord Vesper. For your Kaggath.”

“My what?” Jora Mei said innocently. This Kaggath would catapult her to Darth Scythia of the Dark Council if she played her cards right, and a happy confluence of motivations would make this Emperor’s Wrath a part of Jora Mei’s power base.

“Lord Mei.” Those delicate features looked a little unnatural in a scowl. “Let us pretend for two minutes that I’m not a completely blind bruiser. Let us further pretend that my time is limited and I simply can’t kill everybody whose death might benefit me, not even for you. Let us pretend, in addition, that I am a servant of the Emperor, and people who waste my time are enemies of the state.”

“Lord Niral. I could say as much to you, given a week or two from today.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll see you on Korriban. Until then our business is concluded.” She turned her back. She might be one of the last people who ever did and lived.

*******

Darth Baras was bloviating again. Darth Marr listened carefully, because every word Baras chose and every one he avoided said something. It was…stimulating, to have such a colleague.

The door to the Dark Council chamber swung open. Darth Vowrawn appeared, fashionably late. And beside him, a young woman, her Force presence crackling like rotten ice. It was Darth Baras’s infamous apprentice, the catspaw who had secured Baras his seat on the Dark Council. She was finished with Corellia, then. Were her sights set on being confirmed as Wrath, that job that had been vacant since the treachery of the last? He didn’t envy anyone the task, but it would be pleasing to have the Emperor’s upper echelons filled again.

“That had better be Darth Vowrawn coming through those doors,” said Baras without turning around.

She spoke. “I’m Darth Vowrawn’s personal guide and bodyguard.” Her voice was older than her face; older and harder.

“Interesting,” said Darth Marr, and watched.

*******

Lana had seen the masked Emperor’s Wrath a hundred times on the holovids. Who hadn’t? She was slim, practically a strand next to Darth Marr’s bulk, as the two opened a holo line to Theron and Lana down on Rishi.

Lana had hoped that Master Gith and Darth Scythia would continue their balancing act as they chased down the Revanite conspiracy, now racing to convince both Imperial and Republic forces to direct their attentions to the true threat. And it was a balance, delicate, in continual motion. She
hadn’t counted on the Wrath being here. Didn’t she have enough enemies to crush on other battlefields? That hard-voiced woman might ruin everything.

**********

“Welcome to Yavin,” said Larr Gith, looking around the improbable alliance’s hefty table. “To recap the whole Revanite thing for those who came late to class…”

She wasn’t sure why the saber-happy bitch bothered with the black mask. Everyone could tell she was annoyed. She was probably just pissed she hadn’t gotten her space battle over Rishi. Why Lana and the others wanted her to join their happy cult-busting party…well, they probably just wanted a bigger Sith vote in the common-enemy runoff. Watch that one backfire. Giving the Emperor’s Wrath a vote in anything would be the beginning of the end for anyone who tried it.

***********

Arcann surveyed both the Sith prisoners as they approached the throne. Their manacles were securely on, leaving them harmless enough to require only a dozen armed guards each. The masked female drew his eye. She was lean, clad in black, and she walked with her black-cased head held high. He half expected her to start dictating terms. This was a woman unaccustomed to being ruled.

Father granted her acknowledgment, and more direct gaze in the space of thirty seconds than Arcann had merited all his life. But if there was one thing Arcann knew, it was that queens bowed or died like anyone else when an Emperor came through. He didn’t need to see her face, nor envy her attentions. Her interview would likely close at the same time as her life, unless something very interesting happened between this defiant pose and the end of his father’s patience.

************

The room was in shambles when Vaylin entered. So ended her father’s audience with the foremost insects of the Sith Empire.

She was disappointed to see that one prisoner stood still amid the carnage. A pacifist from a land of whimpering curs. What did she think she was proving?

“In all my centuries,” said Father, “you alone have merited my full attention.” Sweet talk, for this stain. Father was unpredictable as always. “You leave your mark upon the galaxy wherever you act, just as I do.”

The voice from the masked woman was cool and hard. “As we did, my lord.” And one brief exchange later, the proud woman knelt.

This, their prize warrior? Scrawnier than Vaylin, drab where Vaylin made black resplendent...kneeling, as Vaylin never had. This was what the shadow Empire had to offer. Vaylin scoffed, and waited for the scene to play itself out.

*************

T7-01 knew who he was helping Lana free. And yet, no alternative computed to the same result. The galaxy needed the Outlander as the ultimate statement of defiance against the Eternal Empire. Regardless of what she had done before.

Teeseven missed other days and other allies, but the fact was, the galaxy still needed protecting.

The carbonite softened and the woman fell into Lana’s arms, groaning. She didn’t look that
dangerous, and T7 hated that all his most optimistic predictions relied on her being dangerous. Still, someday T7 + Jedi = hero again. Until then, this infamous stranger would have to do.

**************

Koth spared a look for the newcomer. She was skinny in black; her doll face and small hands, the only exposed parts, were swollen and pink. She curled up on the floor and groaned. What a mess, but who knew, she might clean up nice. Lana was putting a lot of hopes on her, whoever she was.

He looked again before he got back to flying. This wisp was the slayer of the Emperor, the one responsible for Arcann’s chaos? She couldn’t even stand up. No, Ruth Niral didn’t seem like much at all.

**************

SCORPIO had extensive files on Ruth Niral thanks to her former associate Wynston’s minor obsession with her. He had left out the carnal details, evidence of his rare outbursts of discretion, but SCORPIO had a good idea of Ruth’s capabilities, her psychological makeup…and now, the woman herself.

Ruth in person surrendered no information that couldn’t have been inferred without her presence. It was disappointing, but it did suggest that SCORPIO didn’t have to worry about anyone particularly clever watching her.

**************

The woman in black was shorter and slimmer than Lana, pale-faced, brown-haired, Human, with upright posture, a balanced stance, and a certain…well. Senya didn’t want to make an enemy of her just then. She could tell when desperation had been fashioned into a personal weapon. She could tell that very well.

**************

The blunt weapon-festooned brunette planted her feet and requested a sitrep like she’d been liaising with military forces since forever

The walking pool of Force presence, her power quiescent but unmistakable, glided into the enclave

The short-haired fashion regret listened to the alternate procurement brief with keen attention

The lean warrior type surveyed the nascent laboratory, rosebud mouth unmoving

The Force-glowing bundle of scars didn’t even need to touch her lightsabers

The unmistakable grey power trod her murky path with confidence

The fur-swathed stranger issued her command in the howling wind

The enemy who could no longer afford to be an enemy watched

The skeptical-looking bundle of planes stared

The professional killer in grey considered

The legendary warrior beckoned
The murderous bitch swaggered

The nefarious mastermind of the Imperial war machine drew the crimson symbols of her bloody trade

The power that was far less tolerant of threats to her own than he had been led to believe

The power that had come out swinging on the side of sanity

The Force-treading foreigner greeted

Hsin’bo’s apparent friend turned

The saber spinner dove right in

The Empire’s future nodded

The Outlander rejected

The hooded yet strangely familiar Jedi extended her small white hand over the Tython footpath…

...............................................................

“The Revanites have been shifting Republic and Empire forces over Rishi. He wants a battle, and if you start firing, he’s going to get it.”

Theron studied Darth Marr in the holo, but the big masked Sith gave no reaction away. Someone else stepped into view: shorter and considerably narrower in formfitting black. She, too, wore a mask.

“Suggestions from a Republic spy and the Sith he suborned.” Her Imperial accent was crisp and chilling, and Theron had the feeling that behind that featureless black mask she was looking right through him. “I recommend we clear the Republic forces out and let the rest of Rishi tend to itself.”

The Wrath. Here. Theron looked at Lana and swore under his breath. The presence of the Emperor’s greatest servant endangered everything. If Theron’s allies past and present didn’t close ranks, soon, her lust for war would destroy everything he had worked for…
The fallout of Ruth's failure on Zakuul. Ruth goes out to deal with her new problem. Wynston, Theron, and Rylon react to her decision. Larr Gith starts heroing.

Vaylin had jumped over the edge of the grand garden. Vaylin had fortuitously found a speeder there. Scythia’s chase would have to continue.

But for now Scythia was watching, jaw dropped, hair flying in the singed breeze. A close observer might correctly infer the not-quite-smile to be one of excitement.

The Force battle she had just witnessed within the fleshy margins of the Outlander. That’s what had excited her. This was beyond her wildest expectations. The game board could never be the same.

Ruth Niral was no longer the biggest power in town. Emperor Valkorion had struck a blow using her, and that was going straight into Scythia’s plans. An Alliance without Niral…an Empire without Niral…a galaxy without Niral…

Too much to handle here.

She walked as quickly as was dignified to where the Outlander’s allies were converging. She might have to kill them if they argued with her. But jointly they had an enemy still on the loose. Stranger alliance had been made.

Ruth was still leaning on her knees, taking deep shuddering breaths. She looked up at Scythia with the face of a cadaver. “Why are you here?”


“Not with you,” rasped Ruth.

Scythia shrugged philosophically. “Lana. With me.”

Lana looked at her former friends. “We can destroy her if we act now. I need to go. I don’t think you’ll be able to keep up with two Force users, but…if you find a speeder, you might still find a way to back us up.”

“We need to get her home,” said Theron. “She can’t fight like this. I’m sorry, Lana. Go find her. Top speed.”

Scythia scanned the scene for vehicles and found one lonely speeder. It would have to do. “With me,” she said, and ran for it, leaving the gaping Force-blinds behind.

* 

Wynston and Calline led the bedraggled party down the road until they found a pair of speeders.
Ruth, Theron, T7-01, Calline and Wynston fled to the ship together.  

She couldn’t feel Valkorion’s awareness. He couldn’t do it again right away, then. She could go home.  

Briefly.  

She said nothing, and in time people stopped trying to make her talk.  

*  

Ops had the usual staff. Ruth stood up straight. She didn’t cry. That was the extent of her contribution.  

“So in the end you decided Arcann was past redeeming,” said Larr Gith. “Good choice.”  

“No,” she said, as firmly as she could. “I didn’t.”  

“Could’ve fooled me. That was a public execution. Everyone on the HoloNet saw it.”  

“Under Valkorion’s control.”  

There was a moment’s silence.  

“What?” said Theron.  

“Valkorion took control. He made that last blow. He killed his son. I failed Senya, again, and I did it by letting him in.” She stopped to avoid a sob. Her eyes burned dry as she took a steadying breath. “I couldn’t stop him.”  

“Ruth, look at me.” He was coming closer, which was the exact opposite of what he should be doing, what he would do if he really understood what she was saying. “It’s okay. You’re here with us now.”  

“But if Valkorion can assert control, we’re all in trouble,” said Wynston. “I thought it was just sporadic awareness?”  

“It’s sporadic other things. I think he’s recovering now, I don’t know when he’ll be able to do it again. I’m sorry, Wynston. I am so sorry.”  

“Can we…contain her?” Larr Gith said dubiously. “I mean, I spent my share of time under the Emperor’s control. Granted I broke free, but there’s got to be something we can do to accelerate that.”  

“Scourge?” Tebbith said quietly.  


“Emperor’s-Wrath Lord Scourge?” said Ruth.  

“That’s the one,” said Larr Gith. “What, you never met him over the evil-people water cooler?”  

It was at once infuriating and sort of comforting that the statuesque Jedi was in normal form. “I need something, Larr. Anything.”  

“Well, the good news is, he knows more than anyone about how to betray the Emperor, including
me. The bad news is he’ll summarily execute you for containing the Emperor’s presence.”

“Oh. That’s a downside.”

“We look elsewhere first, okay? Anywhere else.”

* Valkorion’s touch was in Ruth’s spine, her crown, in the core of her will. He had been watching and waiting for so long. Maybe she shouldn’t have been surprised that his hand had been, not helpless, but patient.

Theron got to their quarters faster than Ruth had anticipated. He looked at her. He looked at the open bag on the bed.

“No,” he said. “No, no, no.”

“I love you,” said Ruth. “And I’ll be back as soon as I’ve removed Valkorion.”

“You can’t do that alone. That’s insane. If you want to avoid the others, okay, not smart, but I’ll accept it. But I’m coming with you.”

“What if he decides to hurt you?”

“He won’t. We’ll figure something out.”

She walked up. She slid a hand around to cradle his head. Flesh and bone, no less vulnerable for being loved. “I could kill you right now. This is the thing that I always, always tried to hide when I was with you. My beloved, this is what I am and always have been. A weapon, and now I’m someone else’s. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t stop that.” She turned to keep packing.

He stood over her. “Don’t be sorry. Don’t be sorry. Ruth.” He stopped. He brought a hand to her cheek. “Don’t leave me. We can beat this. Just don’t go.”

“I asked you once if you could care for Rylon when I was gone.”

His tawny eyes narrowed. “We are not discussing this!”

“Theron, we have to! The thing in my head has devoured planets, he will think nothing of toying with and killing the people I love most! And he’s going to do it with my hands!”

“You can fight him!”

“I’m tired!” She swallowed, letting the word hang. She had felt so much in those few seconds. She had felt that that will was straining, but not hard. She had felt that it would happen again, though she didn’t know where or when. “I am so, tired, of trying to be everything to everyone and just failing the people I love in the process. I’m tired, Theron. And I’m terrified that if I let down my guard he’s going to use me again. I’m even more terrified that I’ll keep my guard up and he’ll use me again anyway. I would rather die than let him hurt you…but he’s not going to give us a choice.”

“We’ll figure something out together. I believe you can resist him.”

In her head ever since she had awakened into this hellscape, closer than her own thoughts as he chose when and where to decide to appear, when to force her to listen, residing between her ears and kicking whenever he felt like it. “I believed it too! Then he murdered a man using my hands!
Theron. I love you. I love you, I love you, I will always love you and I will come back to you when he is gone. Please. Wait for me.”

“Don’t ask me to wait.”

“We have to commit completely, at least at first. I can kill you over the holo. I can kill you from line of sight. I can kill you in the darkness and I can kill you in the elements. And, Theron, anything I can do, he can do.” For those few seconds Valkorion had gloried in it. She felt the emotion closing around her like a shadowbox. Once she’d thought it herself in his moments of aiding: glory.

Aiding himself only. Always.

She was shaking. Theron touched her shoulder. Then he pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around her. “I’m not saying goodbye,” he said gently.

She couldn’t stop it. She could never stop it. She had lost that battle alongside Darth Marr years ago, and everything since then was just the fruition of her defeat. “Theron, I...”

“No.” Less gentle. “I’m not saying goodbye.” He took hold of her upper arms. “I don’t accept this. I never will. There has to be another way.”

If she could make it hurt less she would. “Picking off my loved ones, one by one. That’s the other way. Or all together. I’m powerful enough to do that. I can break out of your average jail cuffs. With Lana gone Larr Gith is the only one with a prayer of stopping me and if she has to fight me I don’t think she would go for the capture option. Theron, I have to go.” She slid her hands up to hug him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. A long time later she released and slid her hands down to his wrists, drawing them around his sides toward his back.

And used the Force to bend up a rail of the bedframe and twist it around one wrist.

She hoisted her bag. “I’m sorry. I am so sorry. Look for an answer. If you find one, name the planet, name the day, name any conditions you want. I’ll be there.”

Theron pulled at the makeshift handcuff. “No. No, you can’t do this.” She made herself turn around to leave. “You promised you wouldn’t do this! Ruth! Ruth, stop it! RUTH!”

She ran.

*  

Wynston was in the hallway, nearly at Ruth’s door. He took in her bag with a glance and fell in step beside her. “Going until you can find a solution?”

“Yes. Are you here to stop me?”

“No. When someone else is in control it pays to not be near the people you care about. Believe me, I know.” He didn’t try to slow her down or steer her. “Ruth, if you encounter setbacks when you fight this. It’s not because you’re weak, it’s not because you’re worthless, and it’s not because he’s won. Remember that, no matter what happens.”

Ruth stopped. She threw her arms around the Chiss and squeezed, hard, tucking her chin over his shoulder and screwing her eyes shut. She didn’t know what to say to cover her expected likelihood of success. What could summarize everything that had come before then? “I love you,” she said thickly.
He squeezed her back. “I know.” He backed off and clasped her shoulders. “I can buy you some time. We’ll do everything we can on our side to find a solution.”

“Keep an eye on Rylon, please. Theron shouldn’t have to carry that alone.”

“I understand. Stay strong, Ruth.”

They parted in haste. Ephel turned from metallic tunnel to stone grandeur.

She felt him bright in the Force just as she reached the big arch leading toward the landing pads. Rylon came rocketing out of the rainy murk, stopping up short on his toes rather than running her over. “I saw you,” he said. “Sana-Rae was showing me. I saw you but I didn’t know when or where. You were crying. What’s happening? Are you okay?”

Ruth tried desperately to clamp down on her own brain. Now, most of all, she had to remain herself. “Rylon. I have to leave for a little while.”

He frowned. “Another mission?”

“Another mission. This one’s important and I might not succeed immediately. You understand that Emperor Valkorion left a presence inside me? A part of his mind?”

“Y-yes.”

“I have to get rid of it, and I can’t be near the people I love until that’s done.”

“Is he trying to hurt us?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Rylon.”

“Is this because you killed the scarred man? Ru-Baden said that was in the past.”

“I think he didn’t know how to interpret this. But the scarred man is dead this time, and the dark presence is fighting me.”

He brought up his chin, looking serious. “Let me come. You need another Sith, Mom.”

“He might use me to hurt you.”

“You could stop him. You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Ruth’s heart broke a little more. “Stay here. Protect Theron and Wynston. They need a Sith, too. In fact Theron’s going to need someone in just a few minutes.” She touched his forehead, partly to make sure he was real, to make sure something beautiful and right and present was really here, really something she could have before someone started taking things away again. “I love you, Rylon. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

She ran for it.

*

Larr Gith was bored in ops until the two of them burst in.

“Her ship has a tracker tuned to our frequency,” said Theron, touching his cybernetics. “It hasn’t gone anywhere yet. There’s still time.”
“Maybe she’s still getting ready somewhere,” said Wynston. He watched as three ships left in neat order. One of them was going to go a long way.

“No. She was in a hurry when she left our quarters. She wouldn’t stop unless…something was wrong with the ship.” He shoved his fingers through his hair. “Or she took someone else’s. Who’s left recently?”

“Four ships in the last half hour,” said Wynston. “It’s been a busy afternoon.”

“No. I won’t let it be.”

“Theron,” he said, his hands flickering across the controls, “I can’t find her.”

“She’s not really gone,” Theron said in a small voice. “I don’t believe it. She’s – no. We can track that ship. Wynston, bring up the registry. Someone owns it and that someone’s going to talk.”

“Theron, she wants to go.”

“Are you defending her insane idea? She needs our help! Wynston, Vaylin is out there! Scythia is out there! Ruth will die out there if her friends don’t go with her!”

“And her friends will die if they do. She’s taking that choice out of our hands and frankly I don’t blame her.”

“I thought you cared about her!”

“I care enough to know that sometimes support operations have to go radio silent in dangerous settings. Extremely dangerous settings. It works because we trust one another.”

Theron set a fist on the console. Then he hit the supporting frame, hard. “I don’t believe this,” he said, and stalked out.

“Larr,” said Wynston, turning to the only Alliance higher-up left. “If you’re going to fight me make it quick, I have deadlines to meet.”

“No argument here, Agent, if Ruth's out and about and you two aren't going to stop her right this minute. Get some sleep, you look like you’ve been dragged here from Kessel on the outside of the ship.”

He looked at her as if not certain whether to get angry. It was the look he’d had in her earliest days here, when he was closed, feral. Scared. It looked awful.

But he took her advice.

The message surfaced then. Just a few words from Ruth, text only. “I trust you to protect them.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, “I can tell.” She tapped the console. “Teb,” she said, “can you come to ops?”

Tebbith came back, voice only. “I don’t want to get in the way...I don’t contribute any strategic ability. And I haven’t exactly been helping lately.”

She tossed her head and took a steadying breath. She was Jedi Master Larr Gith, the Hero of Tython and savior of the galaxy. “Teb. Can you please come to ops.”

He showed up fast, wherever he’d been sitting. He scanned ops – six analysts at their stations, Larr
Gith at the big holo – and said “Master Larr?”

“The office,” she said, pointing. The private space off ops proper had proved to be a worthwhile renovation.

She looked him over as he closed the door behind them. He looked like he’d seen better days. Why was it when somebody hit Ruth, it was everyone around her that felt it? Thankfully Larr Gith was immune.

“Teb,” she said, “we’re good friends.”

“I’m honored to believe so.”

“And we would do a lot for each other.”

“You have only to ask, within my abilities.”

“Then I ask this. You can’t. Be afraid. If the alarm comes? You and I are it. Wynston’s a basket case and Theron once someone scrapes him off the ceiling is going to be either out there or surgically grafted onto Ruth’s kid, which is cute but not very constructive at this point.”

He looked pained. He had deep brown eyes of the texture and clarity that would drown any woman he let near. Or, this being him, any man. And he had dedicated his life to not deploying them. “You know why I stepped down from the Jedi Council,” he said. “I get people killed.”

“People die! We try to stop it! You can’t solve the first by quitting the second!” She cleared her throat. “Just don’t tell anybody I’ve been learning life lessons.”

“Say I were to help you. Say I were to make a difference and a positive one this time. Then what do we do?”

“Now? This afternoon?” Larr Gith tried to shrug without looking unattractive. “All we can do. We make plans. We plan for when she gets back all fixed up. And we make the focal point that everybody else is going to be losing their heads around. We are Jedi. Let’s act like it.”
Ruth leans back in the pilot’s seat and lets her stolen, hopefully non-tracked ship leap up the hyperspace stream. She cried, for a while, aimlessly. She couldn’t see her friends again until she was certain the Emperor would not take control of her actions. This loss was so much bigger than Wynston or Theron or even Rylon. And yet really, what had been taken now that she hadn’t given away in the past? She had no one to blame but herself for every parsec set between her and the people she loved.

The times she’d allowed the Emperor to use her had been times of total tumult. When she was fighting Arcann on her chaotic escape from Zakuul. When she was battling a never-ending stream of Zakuulian knights during the same escape. When she had been broken-legged and alone with a dying woman in the Dromund Kaas jungle. And when she had tried to face down Arcann and Vaylin in one night. Times of chaos, times of pressure. Times when, apparently, she needed more discipline.

She wrapped Theron’s jacket more securely around herself. She wanted to scour the galaxy for an answer, but she was only one woman and time was not on her side. Besides, everything she knew, Valkorion knew. Any new thing she heard about and pursued, she had to assume would be sabotaged. Possibly by her own hands. Whatever it was she did it would have to be with the resources she carried with her.

Against that ancient will, what did she have?

Love, she thought, and gave a hysterical little laugh. The friends he could make her destroy. Stupid, stupid ideas about goodness and kindness and protection and all those things that got drilled away when somebody hollowed you out from the inside.

She had to use that. She had to be better than this. She was a master of this, a Sith, the person so powerful they’d put five years into trying to break her and failed.

“Try me,” she said.

Silence in her head.

“Go on. Try it now.” The Force shimmered around her, the Light Side warm and welcoming. “Try me, Valkorion, unless you’re afraid.”

The world greyed. He stepped in. He hadn’t broken himself on his effort on Zakuul, then. Ruth’s stomach churned.

He frowned at her. “And should I obligingly continue testing your will until you know exactly how
to resist me? I think not. Your hands are mine, Ruth. I will call for them when I desire. Not before.”

“I will stop you.”

“If you are so certain of that, why are you shaking?”

She swung up in the Force, an invisible blade. It cut through Valkorion without leaving so much as a disturbance in his shadow form. “Predictable,” he said, and vanished.

What could she ground herself with? She had had a novitiate on Korriban, and it had been taken away by Baras. She had had an apprenticeship all over the galaxy, and it had been taken away by her husband. She had had a career as the Wrath, and it had been taken away by Arcann. She had had a home, a real, true home, on Odessen, and it had been taken away by Scythia. Now she had Ephel. It was going to go differently. Maybe her foundations were sand, maybe there was nowhere in the galaxy that didn’t offer just sand for foundations, but with enough will anything was possible.

She cried for a while, aimlessly. She missed the people she loved, and she had slapped them all in the face to come this far. She had better have something to show for it.

Something beeped and scurried. Ruth yelped and pulled her feet off the floor, only to see a mouse droid that might come halfway to her knee nose into the room. It made a quick circuit of the room and settled down by the navicomputer. She realized seconds later that a data port had been installed at the right level.

<Stranger = unexpected // requirements = ???>

“Stay on course, please,” Ruth said uncertainly. “If I stay on my business will you, er, stay on yours? Including safely handling this vessel while I require it?”

<Terms = acceptable // Sith = talks nicely // old owner = soon?>

“As soon as I get back. That’s a promise.”

Then she wiped her face and started to meditate.

* 

T5-M7 found Rylon in the Force enclave, the big rocky grotto that had started to get outfitted in practice dummies and meditation cushions. It did not have standard sized stairs, or roller-friendly floors.

But T5 didn’t have a lot of friends, and Rylon Niral had been nice during the evacuation.

The little Sith opened his eyes as T5 approached. He stood up. His clothing units were starting to show skin around the wrists and ankles. He was probably overdue for maintenance.

“Hey, Teefive,” he said quietly. “What’s up?”

<Armored lady = Manderlorian exercise // T5 = not needed>

“Aw,” said Rylon. “She needs you. She’s got to look for my mother.”

<Now = no // T5 = helpful plants?>
Rylon considered. He never complained about T5’s language libraries. “Well, there’s one thing you could do.”

T5 beeped attentively.

Rylon looked upset, but he grinned a little. He brought up a hand. T5-M7 quivered and rose off the floor.

<!!!!!!>

Rylon laughed. “Want to see how far you can go?”

<Answer = NO>

Rylon wobbled her for a few seconds while she squeaked and sputtered. Then, laughter fading, he let her down.

<!!!!!!!!!>

“It’s okay,” said Rylon. “That was really hard. I’ve never done that much before. I guess you really can use your fear. Everybody here is scared to death.”

<!!!!!!!!!!!>

“Hey, can you fix consoles?”

Desperately thankful for the change of subject, T5 burbled <Capability = umlaut>

“That one in the corner has been broken since forever. Sana-Rae keeps saying I should meditate whenever I complain about it.”

<T5 = qualified technician>

“This way,” said Rylon. He put a companionable hand on T5’s flat green head and led her on.

T5 beeped delicately. <Saber spin = okay? // Small Sith = okay?>

“I’ve been trying,” Rylon said quietly. “But I can’t see when she’s going to…” He tucked in his lips and stood up straighter. “Come on.”

*

Theron could spend the next year in a search vessel without blinking, but at some point he had to deal with other things. Like a kid who was suddenly without a mom.

Theron checked outside ops. Rylon had vanished. He holoed. “Rylon, can you come in?”

The dark-haired boy on the holo looked anxious. “No.”

“Okay.” The sole authority over Rylon’s behavior wasn’t here anymore. “Can I come to you?” Not for long. But somebody had to make sure he was okay.

Rylon raised his eyebrows. He looked horribly much like his father. “I guess,” he said. “Meet me at the front stairs.” He looked down on someone out of view. “Go on, T5. You did a good job.”

The rain had passed. The greenish sunset made the brown walls of the long gorge glow an oddly
organic shade. From the front of the temple the steps ran down in rounded ripples to an ancient road leading nowhere and, to the side, a river running narrowly between stone banks into a green grove.

Rylon was standing on the steps, fidgeting.

He came up straight as a soldier when he spied Theron. “Hey,” he said. “Adversity is friendship’s truest test.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” They always greeted one another with Jedi one-liners, acknowledgments of both of their ill-fated careers on Tython.

“You think so?” Rylon said anxiously.

“Let’s go someplace,” said Theron. “Thanks for freeing me, by the way.”

“Why did Mom do that?”

“Because I was going to stop her, chief. That’s all.”

“How were you going to stop the Emperor being in her head?”

“I will. I just will. That’s all there is to it.” Theron rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

“Can we go not here for a minute?”

“Uh, sure.” Getting into a ship and jumping at random wouldn’t be helping anyone anyway.

Rylon led Theron down the steps and onto a bumpy natural path beside the river. He jumped from rock to rock on either side of the path proper, sometimes wobbling on a landing, occasionally shooting straight onto a rock that tipped him. He recovered like he’d never heard of joint pain.

The path led into the grove where dark green trees tangled and reached for the sunset. The river here spread out into a treacherous lace of roots and water. Rylon deftly navigated them across the entire width and onto moss-spongy ground on the far side.

“How do you see anything in here?” said Theron. He had his cybernetics, but Rylon surely didn’t.

“It’s not half dark yet,” said Rylon. The anxiety had bled away on the journey. “Up here.”

The place was a mossy clearing dotted with blood-red flowers. The trees here were old and solid, thickly branched from root to tip. Rylon trotted ahead and leaped onto a low branch, then scrambled up to another, then paused in a deep V.

“Walking around with the class for exercise isn’t the same,” he said.

“I can see that,” said Theron. The boy seemed to be waiting for something. Theron picked a tree and stepped up the first branch.

“Are you going to find Mom?” said Rylon.

“Yes. I am. I just wanted to make sure you were okay first.”

“Climb.”

“What?”
“Climb. First step’s nothing.” He shimmied up from his perch and planted his foot on a higher branch.

Theron climbed. Every branch he took, Rylon matched. He finally reached a dead spot; the next pair of branches was close to two meters up. He looked at Rylon, who was watching attentively. He jumped, caught, swung, and kicked up to hook his legs over the other high branch. “Easy,” he said loudly.

Rylon grinned. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Well, I thought my chandelier-swinging days were behind me.”

“You had chandelier-swinging days?”

“It’s this holovid. Classic. I’ll show you, once things are more settled.”

Rylon nodded. He scrambled further up. “Is Mom coming back?”

“Whoa! Yes! What brought that on?”

“She’s fighting Valkorion. The only other time he ever got beat was when Arcann tried to kill him and now Arcann’s dead too.”

“There’ve been other times,” Theron said loudly. “This is not something you have to worry about.”

“But she won’t come back until he’s dead.”

“She’ll come back,” said Theron. “She will absolutely come back. This’ll all blow over soon.”

He couldn’t see the blue of those eyes from here, but he could tell they were spearing him. “I’m practicing how to tell when people are lying.”

“Rylon. Your mom’s going to be okay.” Because if she wasn’t, everything else was pointless.

“I saw the darkness eating her up. They said it was in the past, but it’s not. It’s happening now. She killed the scarred man and now…”

“Now she’s going to be okay,” Theron said thickly.

“Okay,” said Rylon. “I guess we can go home now.”

Theron looked down, which he hadn’t done yet. It was a somewhat taller view than he usually had to deal with. “Yeah,” he said. “Hold down the fort, chief. It’s time for me to go.”

*

“Somebody needs to turn this ship around,” said Larr Gith.

Everyone stood in silence.

“I nominate me,” said Larr Gith.

“You have my support,” said Tebbith.

“I don’t see anybody else,” said Koth.

“Right,” said Theron. “So how are we rescuing Ruth?”
“We need to understand how to eliminate the Emperor,” said Wynston. “That means research, lore. Field work. Interviews.”


Wynston had the sense to answer the question rather than insisting on the Emperor search. “I don’t know where she would have gone,” he said. “Vette might have ideas. Otherwise? She just cut herself off from our resources here, though I’ll keep her network access open if she wants to use it. She can’t kill me through Holonet mail.”

“You’ve known her for over a decade. That’s the best you’ve got?”

“What do you want me to tell you, Theron? Dromund Kaas, where her home’s been invaded by the likes of Darth Scythia? Korriban, which she wouldn’t even talk about to me? Voss, where her husband gave her his favorite lies? We delivered her the galaxy but she never had a planet. Her home is where the mission is. And right now the mission is keeping you alive.”

“That’s an idiotic mission and she knows it.”

“I understand why,” said Tebbith.

Everybody looked at him.

“I’m not saying I agree,” Tebbith said hurriedly. “But I understand the impulse for protection. At any cost. Even if, as a Jedi, I could never extend the same favoritism.” He coughed and buried his hands in his sleeves. If anybody were looking, they might see Koth stifling a smile.

“In the interest of keeping things together, I’m going to forgo the usual riding forth and instead stay here to coordinate,” said Larr Gith. “Now is that leadership or what?”

“Bravo,” said Wynston, squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I will assist in any way necessary.”

“Call me when you’ve decided on something,” said Theron, and stalked toward the door. He paused in the doorway, though.

“Tebbith,” Wynston said, very calmly, “do you think any resources on Tython could shed light on the nature of the Emperor’s immortality?”

“Er-hm,” Larr Gith said loudly.

“Yes?”

“Teb,” Larr Gith said, “anything on Tython that might help?”

“I will do my best,” he said. “I know where to look.”

“What, ‘undying lich 101’ isn’t already in the card catalog?”

“I know the other card catalog, my friend.”

“Be careful.”

“Holocrons almost never try to eat me,” he said, with a strained smile. “By your leave.”

“Hold on,” said Koth. “Unless you’ve got another assignment for me… I could help. On Tython.
I’m not an expert but I can assist.”

“Teb? Up to you.”

“Please, yes.” He bowed and retreated toward the door. Koth fell in behind him, seeming to swagger just a tiny tasteful bit.

“One thing before you go,” Wynston said loudly. “Everyone. Vaylin has been conditioned with a keyword that stops her attacking. If you get close enough, speak quickly. ‘Kneel before the dragon of Zakuul.’ It may save your life. I hope it never has to.”

“How did you find out about this?” said Larr Gith.

“I’d rather not repeat it,” said Wynston. “I think that’s everything.”

Tebbith bowed again and left. Theron had already vanished.

“Next up,” said Larr Gith. “Somebody ought to make sure Vaylin stays occupied, but one little keyword doesn’t sound like a lot. It’s a suicide mission for anyone but the big guns, and I’m busy here. So we just hurry up to finish this before she gets excited. Calline, you think you could go double Theron’s search for Ruth?”

Calline inclined her head.

“Take Vette,” said Wynston. “She’s known Ruth longer than any of us.”

“Good plan,” Larr Gith said graciously. Calline nodded and glided out. “So that’s most of us.”

“Agreed,” said Wynston. “Spread in all directions. Zakuul, Empire, Republic – Rakata, anything. Master Larr, how did you shake the Emperor’s control?”

“I’m me,” she said. “That’s all there is to it.”

“There has to be more.”

“I hope so,” she said.

*

Theron’s ship was barely more than a shuttle with a hyperdrive. It was good enough. He thought about the holo, an aching presence in his mind, until he selected a destination and jumped to hyperspace.

He couldn’t call her. Thoughts of her raising her gloved hand and him losing air…could that really be worse than watching her run?…damn it, man, be rational. He couldn’t call her. He dictated something instead. He dictated a few things, cleared his throat, deleted them.

“Don’t tell me there’s nothing I can do,” he said, and sent it to her. It would have to do.

*

The back of the temple on Ephel came out on a plateau. A crazy steep higher ridge to one side was getting undercut, day by day, by builders creating hangars for the ships that currently lay helter-skelter across the expanse.

“Your place or mine?” said Vette.
“There’s gear we’ll want in mine,” said Calline. “You want your crew?”

“I think we need them more freewheeling. Risha can look after them. So, did the dance party help?”

“Mandalorian hunting ritual,” said Calline. “Soon as Teefive gets back…”

The little green astromech was rolling over the uneven ground at respectable speed. “There he is,” said Vette.

“She.”

Vette gave Calline a funny look. Calline shrugged.

“So you find people for a living,” said Vette, “and I’ve known Ruth longer than anybody else alive, except maaaaybe Overseer Tremel, disturbingly enough. We’ll get this.”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t be much help ejecting ancient evils from people’s heads. Let the Jedi work on that.” Vette cocked her head. “Why’d you uninvite Theron?”

“Emotion overload,” said Calline, gesturing vaguely.

“I’ll be sure to tell him he’s too touchy-feely for our contractors.”

Calline scoffed.

T5-M7 rolled up. <Manderlorian time = over // we = extrapolate?>

“Say what now?” said Vette.

Calline tossed her a manual for what appeared to be droid languages. “Main words are in there.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Calline stood up, stretched, and strolled into the lumpy yellow ship. “That was kidding?”

The Boorcati Ch’at Baversco labored into the heavens, and Vette rode along with it.

“First steps?” said Calline. Vette followed her voice upstairs. The tall Chiss’s feet were up on the navicomputer. She had a drink placed on a coaster painted with a rude motto on T5-M7’s flat top. She eyed Vette.

“Well,” said Vette, “Ruth likes to go back. A lot. Not always well. For her, that’s Dromund Kaas or Korriban, and she liked Dromund Kaas more.”

“But everyone knows her there.”

“Yeah, but she grew up knowing she would be a Sith Commander. She doesn’t mind the attention like normal people would.”

“Hm.” Calline picked up drink and coaster from T5’s head and let the droid tap into the navicomputer. “Kaas City?”

“Second on the list. We go to the Niral estate first. It’s a couple hundred klicks west of the city. Not bad, for a Sith stronghold. Practically normal in places.”
“Huh,” said Calline.

“If she was going to go back to the beginning, that’s where she’d go.”
Chapter Summary

The Alliance looks for answers: Theron checks the numbers. Tebbith and Koth investigate the Emperor and Force shielding on Tython. Pierce runs support on Ephel. Rylon attempts a helpful vision. Larr Gith makes an executive decision. Calline and Vette investigate Ruth’s childhood home. Scythia takes Lana’s measure as they work to bring Vaylin down together. Ruth returns to an old haunt, but not the one everyone would think of. (Koth, Tebbith, Pierce, Wynston, Rylon Niral, Sith, Larr Gith, T5-M7, Calline, Vette, Ruth)

The transfer station was unremarkable, which was the point. It skimmed half of Hutta’s transaction records and put it in friendly form for the benefit of the SIS.

Theron didn’t even have to slice, as such. He used the latest perfectly legitimate credentials he had and put a flag on anything from Ruth’s accounts. She was a resourceful woman, but it was hard not to use credits as a resource.

There were sites that would cover other segments of the galaxy. Boring compared to talking his way into situations and bluffing his way out, but nobody ever said being a spy was glamorous.

Well, nobody who knew what they were talking about.

*  
Koth looked skeptical. “I’m still having a little trouble processing. Ruth, compromised? More than she was as a Sith?”

“Against her will,” said Tebbith. “Our efforts to excise the Emperor just became our top priority.”

“So Arcann’s down, great. She’s finally done something useful. But we’re scattering our forces while Vaylin’s on the loose?”

“Do we have a choice? The Outlander would volunteer to die if we could be sure it would destroy him.” There was a time he would’ve considered that a categorical no. These days, though…no. Not today. Maybe his Jedi credentials were getting shaky but his pragmatic ones weren’t printed yet. “I can’t ask her to do that unless we’re sure.”

“So we’re going?”

“Back to my source. Tython.”

“Will there be a problem getting a non-Jedi in?”

“Far from it.” Although, everyone there would see it instantly. See what the Barsen’thor had…
become. There would be no going back once he appeared in public with a…

…a what, a kisser?

No. He was more than that. That was the scary part.

“Never a problem, Koth. Listen. I couldn’t do what the Outlander just did. Leave everyone, for any reason. Her leaving just made me realize, attachments are all around me. Yet I feel more myself here than I ever have before. Tython doesn’t know about that. But I don’t care if they see it.”

“You would really tell them about you and me?”

“Proudly.”

“Wouldn’t they kick you out or something?”

“Possibly.” Somewhere along the line that had become less scary. He had somewhere to come home to.

Koth half smiled. “All right. You can show me around your old haunts.”

“I have some research in mind to start en route. I already looked up what we had the Emperor, his past, his strongholds, his abilities, back when I joined the Alliance. It wasn’t enough. I have an alternate tack in mind. Let’s drag a couple of consoles together. I have a feeling we’re going to want to make an enclosure that can stop an extremely high-end Force user.”

Koth accepted the switch from relationship to business. “Not lethal force?”

“Koth. That isn’t an option.”

“Not to be a pessimist, but it’s much better documented.”

“Trust in the Force. We will find a way to let the Outlander come home.”

*

Major Pierce lounged against the wall in ops. “Going to be busy,” he volunteered.

“Here?” Wynston turned a full circle looking at ops with its perpetual analysis team sitting at consoles and staring at holos. Larr Gith had vanished for what she promised was five minutes. The command staff was gone, all but Wynston. It meant he had to ration his drinks himself. It was a little bothersome and a little heady. This was what he had tried to build using the Black Codex and the best of Imperial black projects. Wasn’t this all he’d ever wanted? All but his best friends getting flung to far corners of the galaxy and set against each other. For now, though? Today? “It’s going to be quieter than it’s ever been.”

“No invasions in the offing?”

“Giving or receiving?”

“Either.”

“No. Not yet.”
“Ruth ran off by herself because of something Vaylin and Arcann did?”

“Their father, actually.”

“Hm. Shouldn’t be much trouble. Ruth faced an ancient entity of blah blah evil and lightsabered it to death. She was interrupted in the middle by a reconstituted immortal cyborg monstrosity, which she lightsabered to death. When she was done there she found her actual enemy and lightsabered him to death. Lightsaber problems? She’s there.”

“You’re very proud of her.”

“The Sith of a lifetime, mate. Thought you of all people would know that. So, what, you’ve got everyone looking up how to kick out the guy you’ve been trying to kick out all this time? What’s changed?”

“What’s changed is we’re going to succeed this time. I have confidence our institutional experience will contribute to changing the outcome.”

“In other words, you’ve got nothing.” Pierce looked him over and grinned. “She vanished to fix a problem herself once. Wouldn’t let her father help. He went off anyway. He died because he went up against an enemy Ruth should’ve been handling.”

“And you think that’s what we’re going to run into.”

“I see a lot of people flying not near the Wrath, is all.”

“Well, there is only one of her.”

“The right number, if you ask me.” Pierce renewed his grin. “Let’s see it stays that way.” He pulled out his holo.

“Pierce–!” said Wynston.

“Sh. This’ll be quick.”

But Ruth didn’t answer.

Seconds later the holo beeped with a text message. “Is Rylon all right?” Pierce read.

Wynston sighed. “He’s fine. Tell her. And then stop bothering her.”

“Fine. Letting her know. Bet you it makes her smile.” He hung up, beamed at Wynston, and sauntered out.

*

Rylon had left the refuge of the grove. It seemed important to be within yelling distance right now.

He knelt in the living room of his mother’s quarters and opened his inner eyes the way Sana-Rae had taught him. The Force chose its visions in its own time, but you could always make yourself just a little more open to it. He drifted, not sure what he was looking for.

Proof that his mother would come home. That would do.
Something gripped the edges of his consciousness and held them open, resisting his reflexive shutdown. The eyes he saw were vast and blood red.

“You’re not the one,” came a voice, rich yet dispassionate. “What do you have to tell me?”

“Who are you,” Rylon tried to say, but something was blocking his throat or brain. The red eyes narrowed. In Rylon’s mind surged an image of his mother’s face, clear and bright. Rylon gasped and tried to snap the vision shut, but the grip held on a moment longer while the pitiless eyes studied.

“Don’t hurt her,” pleaded Rylon. Then the presence was gone.

*

“Get Torian’s people on it,” said Larr Gith.

“Torian’s people are split between Onderon and Dxun,” said Wynston.

“Vette’s crew?”

“Still following up one of Vette’s ideas. You know they have a dozen planets to sweep just to get through Ruth and Vette’s history.”

“Didn’t need the full briefing, thanks. What about Pierce’s guard?”

“Our ground defense here. We can’t let Odessen happen again.”

“Tora?”

“Orbiting with the Gravestone until the Fleet moves. We need readiness.”

“Jorgan?”

“Still en route to Ilum. We need the shipment he's intercepting.”

She pointed. “But this Eternal detachment is bombarding Balmorra. Can, I don’t know, Gault, con something?”

“Larr, we don’t have the resources to fight every fight that presents itself.”

Her lovely pale brow plunged. “Right. Just abandon the lowest-value ones. The Imperial way. I’m better than that, Wynston. I will always be better than that.”

You and what army? he didn’t say. She needed help, not acid. “Something has to be delayed. Just until we can clear the top line.”

“And say no to this?” She pointed at the big board. “And this, and this, and this, and this? There has to be someone. There have to be a lot of someones. We can do this if we just try.”

He had always simplified the morning briefings for the top brass. “I have always recommended improvising where we can and prioritizing where we have to. It’s the only way the Alliance can stay relevant.”

“If we pull some of Torian’s men—”

“Then the remainder will be overrun. Don’t second guess what you’ve already committed.”
Larr Gith rounded on him. “If you’re such an expert, why don’t you run this?”

“I can. If you ask me to.”

Larr Gith stared, open-mouthed. “Have you been just standing here waiting for me to fail?”

“No.” His head swam but he had things under control. He could run this place in his sleep if he had to. “I’ve been assisting you in keeping things from failing. I want to see you succeed. If you don’t want to continue in this capacity, including watching as some things are forced to secondary status, I’ll step in. I’ll free up our most powerful player. Do you think you can track down Vaylin’s whereabouts before she finds the way to undo her conditioning?”

“What, by asking nicely?”

“No. I suggest you go to Zakuul. Find Indo Zal. He should be delighted to meet you.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because you’re the most beautiful woman any of us has ever seen, and you’re in a position to help fight Vaylin. He will appreciate both those traits.”

She looked sulky. “You’re trying to cheer me up.”

“It was the beauty thing, wasn’t it. I’m sorry, I usually lie about that. I can next time.”

“Don’t. I’ll get everything these guys know about Vaylin. She won’t be blindsiding anybody.”

“Thank you. I’ll see to minimizing damages here. I’ll be at your back, from a distance. As long as Vaylin’s out there, we need a hero. I believe that’s your department.”

Larr Gith rallied. “You bet your buttons it is. Just…fix what you can?” Her brow wrinkled. “Please?”

“I’ll give it my all. And the all of several hundred loyal associates with assignments tailored to their specific abilities. Go on, Master Larr. I can’t save everything in this galaxy, but I will hold down the fort.”

* 

“We have an hour,” said Koth, returning from the bridge.

“My access here is limited,” said Tebbith. “We’ll have more to work with on Tython. Until then…I should meditate.”

“The whole time?”

Tebbith looked guilty.

“I don’t want to ruin your planning. I just thought we could talk.”

“What about?”

“How much I enjoyed kissing you, for starters.”
“Oh. I certainly…that is…if you…”

“Relocate to the lounge?” Probably safer than the bedroom. He didn’t actually want to frighten the man.

Tebbith walked ahead of him, and settled on one of the dull beige couches. Koth pulled up an armchair opposite him.

Tebbith scowled and cleared his throat. “Koth. I…I have to say, this…my…reservations, they are…not about you. You are a good man, a trustworthy man. This just isn’t something I’ve ever had to navigate. I never had to think about…desire, before, even on a theoretical level. I never let myself. Is it a language? Is it a branch of mathematics? Is it mechanical…” he swallowed hard…”operation? Or art? Is it the history of this mythical country you make me desperate to visit?”

“It has to fit into your studies somehow.” Koth shook his head and grinned. “If you try to take notes I will stop you.”

“Understood.”

“That was a joke, Tebbith.”

Tebbith looked uncertain.

“Let’s start from first principles. I want something with you.”

“And I with you.”

“Romantic? Sexual? Both?”

The response was instant. “Yes.” Tebbith blinked, a little too late to hide the flame. “Please pretend I said that in a dignified manner with some forethought.”

“I don’t think I will,” said Koth. “I’d hate to start this on a lie.” He leaned forward without demanding a physical response. “You know what? I changed my mind. Take notes. Write down what you think of us now. Then write down what you think of us tomorrow. Record this. Remember every first time I can give you. At your own pace. Give it all just a little antici…”

Tebbith waited attentively. Several seconds later he seemed to realize Koth wasn’t just going to say it for him through that enigmatic smile. “Pation,” he said quietly.

Koth smiled. “And that, the instant you had to open your mouth, is how I feel about you all the time.”

Tebbith did not, in fact, end up meditating.

*

It wasn’t rainy when Calline took the Boorcati Ch’at Baversco in to the little landing pad nestled in the wind-rotled jungle of Dromund Kaas. Visibility was great; only a few interlaced wracks of cloud blocked the bleak white sun from the bluish vegetation below.

“Let me go first,” said Vette. “Ruth always said she trapped this place before she left it.”

“Huh.” Calline turned to T5-M7 and tapped a quick series of commands on the edge of her round green head. T5 withdrew. Calline and Vette stepped onto the pad.
“Pressure pad,” said Vette. “This whole line. See that seam? Think you can jump two meters?”

Calline answered by activating her jetpack and flying over to the safe zone.

“Well, fine then,” said Vette, and took a running start herself.

Vette took out a canister as they approached the ramp that lowered into the ground to a little door. She sprayed around the door and hummed thoughtfully at the green laser beams there. A mirror and a little work later, the mechanism snapped and hummed down.

They proceeded like this down a long hallway and up some stairs to a more friendly-looking wooden door. When Vette opened it a pair of scorpion droids rolled in and took aim. Calline shot them to pieces in seconds flat.

“Remind me not to get on your bad side,” said Vette.

“Heh,” said Calline.

They reached a big living room. A dead fireplace stood in one corner, seemingly waiting for a cooler season that wouldn’t come.

“We came here once,” said Vette. “Her and me and the others. It was after Baras had put out the death notice on Ruth. She wanted to strategize with her father. She walked in saying her master was trying to kill her and he just said, okay, let’s plan resources and alliances.” Vette sniffled a little. “I still don’t understand why she forgave him for her entire upbringing. Her father was like, sure I sent you into a godsforsaken deathtrap with nothing but a training saber and a winning personality, but you turned out great! Sweet guy. Some significant blind spots.”

“Sith,” said Calline.

Vette sighed. “Sith. Still, he was nice. Everyone blames Quinn for her going off the deep end, which I fully understand, but losing Lord Niral was just as bad. You should’ve seen what she did to the guy who…well, no, you shouldn’t.”

Calline edged into the hallway. Another droid skittered up and she shot it. Now that they were inside the defenses weren’t trying very hard, in her professional opinion.

She shot its mate off the ceiling.

“You knew my brother then,” she said.

“He and there. Even after he and Ruth stopped playing around. I never respected him more than when he said “No romance no problem” and still paid for a full Alderaanian dinner party.”

“Hm. Out of character.”

“The no-romance part, sure. Still, they kept finding each other.”

“Was he happy?”

“Let’s just say I didn’t know what he looked like not smiling until I came to the Alliance.”

“Hm.” Calline considered. “She still makes him smile.”

“Hey, I try, but nobody appreciates my jokes.”
Calline checked one of the doors and turned on her glove light. The room was big for a bedroom, dimly illuminated by a light that by some miracle hadn't died yet. Vette waved to bring it to full light. This was a comfortably cluttered room: a mandoviol case, several carved pieces of furniture, patterned wall hangings everywhere, the dust-furred leavings of an eclectic taste.

“Untouched,” said Calline.

“Yup,” said Vette. “Moving on.”

Down the hallway they found a door that led into a square room with shuttered windows. There was a narrow bed, a nightstand, a wood panel box with no visible locking mechanism. A spiral-staircase glass shelf carried dozens of jewel-toned crystal figurines. The bedspread was scattered with stars, and after a moment Calline realized that the stars were matched with tiny hangings up over the wall and ceiling. The inhabitant would be sleeping in the Galactic Core.

The light was broken.

Calline opened the blinds. There was a verandah outside, and beyond that two curving paths into a garden overgrown with lilies. She turned around to see Vette waiting in the doorway.

“That’s it, huh?” the Twi’lek said. “Those figurines look like they took some work. I bet she picked them out especially. And built them. A lot of spare time when you don’t have a lot of friends.”

“Delicate,” said Calline, eyeing the tiny figures.

“She would take care of ’em.”

Calline grunted. “She loved the garden.”

“How can you tell?”

Calline pointed. “Three vases in here.”

“Doesn't that mean she loved chopping the garden up?”

Calline glared.

“Just saying. Look, this one's still got dead stuff in it.”

“Just dusty here.” Calline shook her head. “She hasn’t been here.”

“No. Still, something might…” Vette stepped next to the bed to pick up the box. “Togrutan puzzle box. Ruth never struck me as the collector type.” She turned it around in her fingers and started pressing and twisting things. A few seconds later the lid popped open. “Child's play, really.”

Calline waited. Vette pulled out an aurodium chain that had a pendant set with two stones, teardrop shaped, facing into one another. One was an almost luminous cut gem, a blue as light as Wynston’s skin; the other was a rough chunk of brown and blue ore.

“Potential and realization,” said Vette. “At least, that’s what I would say if I were getting paid to analyze the scene for some first-year philosophy students. Come on, Ruth might like the memento.”
“But she’s not here,” said Calline.

“So, spaceport,” said Vette. “Let’s go.”

“I…had hoped Wynston would have more guesses.”

“Yeah. He’s an ideas guy.”

“He knows her. That’s irreplaceable.” The bounty hunter frowned. “Well, until you start paying really well.”

Teefive was waiting for them. Calline nodded greeting. “Anything?”

<ship = teakettle // no ships = teakettles>

“Basic?” said Vette.

“She’s been scanning air traffic control logs while we were in there. No sign of the ship Ruth took. She’s not made for handling this kind of data…” Calline flicked the ship’s controls and lifted off. “I know who is. Any business you can think of on Nar Shaddaa?”

*

Hyperspace.

“Do you desire power, Lana Beniko?”

Lana looked over at where Darth Scythia sat at a console. “Only enough to protect my chosen way of life.”

“And your chosen people. And your chosen philosophy. And your chosen dictator, once. Where does it end?”

“I was behind the scenes. I was supporting the throne. I mediated, I enabled. All I wanted was someone I could respect to put that effort behind.”

Scythia pursed her dark lips. The hyperspace display ghosted over her tattoos, setting them moving. “I’m flattered. Sincerely. In this battle ahead, for Vaylin? I will not disappoint you.”

No. She would only obsessively enmesh Lana deeper and deeper in blackmail, deceit, half-truths, and a vast blank spot where sentient compassion should be. No, she would not disappoint at all, once you lowered your expectations enough.

“You may see your lover there.”

“I expect so.”

“Wrath. Scythia. Beniko. Vaylin. He’s going to be badly out of his league.”

“I believe it’s possible I can sway him to our side. Once he understands that we’re fighting the same enemy…”

“He’ll do what he has not done to date? If true love could move him, he would have moved.”

Scythia gestured idly. “Lord Beniko, if this week goes well you and I will conclude our business.”
“if it goes very well I’ll have something to go back to after.”

“Ruth Niral forgave the husband who colluded with her teacher to murder her, or try. She’ll forgive a short bout of aiding and abetting the enemy.”

“It’s not Ruth I’m concerned about.”

“Ah, yes. While we have time, why don’t you tell me about Wynston. He is such a, shall we say, cipher.”

Lana had to pry her teeth apart. “No.”

* 

“You remember this place,” said Ruth.

Valkorion within was silent.

The fortress of the Voice of the Emperor orbited a small star well outside the galaxy’s outer arm. The vessel was a bulky construct of black metal and white light that hurt the eyes without illuminating anything. Once it had been a place of red guards and shadowy orders. Here the Emperor's Wrath had knelt, and received her commands.

“Convenient,” she said, “that I don’t have to come back here anymore. But here was your strongest physical form. Damn it, show yourself.”

Valkorion within was silent.

Ruth stalked the hallways, then plunged down a radial hall to the throne room. It was round and black and white, lit for the benefit of no one but herself. She could feel the power here, scuffed and faded, but the original source of that power stayed silent.

“Does this bring out nothing? Are you so afraid in your own stronghold?”

Valkorion within was silent. She wished he would say something if only to have a response to her own words. It had been days, no contact except an increasing volume of text messages she didn’t have the mental fortitude to face.

So really here, nobody was as powerful as they were supposed to be.

She sat on the cold durasteel throne and, ensconced in the old shell of her master, tried to meditate once more, tried to drag her center out of the fear. She drew circles over the darkness without dipping into it; she could almost ignore the little box inside that she could not bring the light to no matter how hard she tried. She could almost ignore it, but then, the only question left in her universe was when it was going to stir.
The Alliance looks for answers: Theron seeks a prior Ruth scene. Larr Gith seeks an ally. Rylon seeks refuge. Tebbith and Koth continue to research on Tython. Ruth sends Wynston an important note. Wynston sends an important message of his own. (Larr Gith, Ally, Rylon Niral, Wynston, Tebbith, Koth, Ruth, Theron, Lana)

There was no one to direct or dispute Theron’s landing on the jungle moon. He descended through a wrenching storm and landed on a dark stone pavilion that only had a few years’ wild growth slicing up the seams.

From his ship he could only tell that biomass covered the planet. He was pretty sure the native Massassi hadn’t gone anywhere. He didn’t expect to find friends on Yavin IV.

He stepped out into a stiff wind. Rain stung his face and tapped madly on his second best jacket. He turned up his collar and headed down the walkway to the ruined landing where once a war table had stood.

Somebody had moved it, and the counsels of the first Empire-Republic alliance were gone without a trace.

But he had met her here. He had seen her on the holo over Rishi, seen her advising against the alliance; but she had come with Marr, and touched down, and started her prickly masked dealings with the agents of the Republic. Theron included. He’d had no idea. No idea at all.

“Ruth!” he yelled. And, bringing his hands up to either side, “Ruth!” Then, after a pause, “Valkorion!”

He knew. He knew damn well that she did have to leave, that there wasn’t a choice, that she had saved his life and the lives of their friends by leaving him behind. He knew her entire reasoning, he had access to every fact, he had watched the mounting cost in her eyes while she weighed the vision of Valkorion taking over again to make her watch herself murdering him, she had been utterly honest and both of them together couldn’t come up with another solution.

It still hurt like hell.

He headed back to his ship and adjusted his cybernetics. She wasn’t answering her holo, but if he was close enough, he might be able to catch her using it for anything else. He detached the speeder. If Ruth had come to the site of the Emperor’s rebirth she was probably at ground zero, and that meant a serious ride through dense jungle with no hope of friendly intervention.

He recorded and sent a terse checkin report to Ephel. He shut down the speeder’s safety overrides
and made the best speed it could physically provide. The jungle hissed and slapped, but it didn’t stop him.

The cultists had abandoned the great temple. Their Emperor had left them. The Dark Side of the Force was probably still thick enough to punch here, but he could only feel a nagging disquiet that blended in pretty well with the howling pain of abandonment.

His boots clicked on the polished floor as he walked to the center of the temple. “Ruth!” he yelled, and his voice bellowed back at him from all directions. “Ruth, it’s Theron. I’m not leaving without you!”

Without you.

Without you.

She had conquered this land once, never thinking about the man who was backing up Republic operations. She had delivered it to his superiors. She had operated so close to him, holding up a mask so neither he nor anyone would ever see the fierce guardian beneath.

What would he say to himself, if he had the chance? What warning received in those distant days could possibly suffice to avoid what he was facing now?

“Valkorion! Ruth!”

If the Emperor gravitated toward the scene of his rebirth, or if Ruth had drawn him to the last scene of his starvation, they had to be near here.

The word seemed to come from several directions at once. “Yes?”

“Ruth?” he yelled back, even though it hadn’t been her voice. “Who’s there?”

“Find the stairs,” sighed the voice. It was masculine and hollow and low. Theron raced around the perimeter of the great chamber until he found a narrow black stone stairwell. He turned on his holo’s light.

“Under the center,” instructed the voice. It echoed down here, as though the underlayer were as extensive as the hall above. Lower ceiling, though. He tried not to think of the sheer mass of stone overhead.

A holocron sat glowing yellow at the chamber’s center.

“What can you tell me about Ruth?” he said. Introductions could wait.

The voice laughed. “Oh, what couldn’t I tell you about Ruth Niral? Is she missing? Am I not with her?”

“What are…you. The Emperor waited here for his ritual. Before he got the number of deaths he needed to leave and go elsewhere.”

“Yes, I did wait. Try throwing yourself through a plate glass window. You’ll leave shards, too. This one is no longer of use. I have forgotten nearly everything, except Yavin. Yavin I recall, and probably will until a greater force than you destroys me.”

“Do you know what’s happened since he – you – got the deaths you wanted?”

“I know one of the dutiful Republic servants is desperately seeking my Wrath. Interesting. Have
you grown to like her? I admit to a certain partiality. She was such a good killer.”

“She is more than you tried to make her.”

“And yet…she is not with you today. Do you think she has some loyalty to you, Theron Shan? Do you think she has anything I have not already possessed and tamed? She has a little treachery in her, to be sure, a defiance that partakes of the inborn shadow I was not responsible for. Next to that… what? Love? Not she. She can protect you, she can kill for you, and I have no doubt you have taken advantage of both. But if she loved you she would already be here with you.”

Defiance. Two could play at that game. “Big words for a box on a forgotten planet.”

“Yet no specific point you can refute, is that so? I knew her for a long time, Theron.”

“I thought you only remembered Yavin.”

“And I remember how completely confident I was in her. I called her away rather than let her join Revan’s crusade against me. And she obeyed. Our relationship in microcosm.”

“How are you immortal, Valkorion? Do you just store pieces of yourself all over the galaxy?”

“This is a castoff. It will last in its current form or it will fade. My whole self will never be able to step out of it. Ah, but in the moment of rising I knew that my self does have a body, and it will rule.”

“And what about your mind inside her.”

“Inside…her?” it sounded genuinely startled.

“Wait…you don’t know what you did to her. You don’t know how you survived getting stabbed in the back. Were you ready to leave your own body?”

“The question is meaningless to you, fool.”

“Try me.”

“Even given a vessel I had cultivated for a decade…no. I could not be contained so. It would break her.”

“Then you’re useless to me. This is going to make me feel a lot better.” He drew his blaster and fired, six or seven or twenty times. The holocron began to smoke. The light dimmed.

“I will destroy you for this arrogance,” whispered the voice.

“I’ll destroy you for a lot of reasons.” He didn’t just mean this lonely device. “Consider it a date.”

*

Zakuulian high society was a cloud of perfection. Larr Gith could blend effortlessly. Well, could look stunning effortlessly, which was similar to blending only better.

It took less than forty-eight hours to verify which areas housed troublemakers. From there she and T7-01 had only to look for Indo Zal, as persuasively as possible. She had the budget to smooth the way.
She recalled Wynston’s description and unflattering mug shot: a small man (and, she thought, he should know all about that), grandly styled hair, big eyes and a bigger fashion sense. She tracked him down on a low street of the main city, miles from the nearest Eternal Empire government building.

“Excuse me,” she said, batting her eyelashes. “You and I have something to talk about.”

He eyed her questioningly. “Do I know you, Miss…?”

“Hm. Master, more like it. – But not like that. Ew. You may have heard of me. Hero of Tython? Main consultant to the Jedi Council?” It was arguably true. “Slayer of the Emperor back before that was cool?” It was completely true. He was looking politely interested with a heavy side of blankness. “Jedi Master Larr Gith?”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Gith?”

“Damn it. The Outlander works for me.”

His eyes went round. “The Outlander? Is she back?”

“No! Honestly! Listen to what I am telling you! I need-”

He took three quick steps back and twitched head to tail, or would have if he’d had a tail. “Patrol!” He shrank away.

They were near a sheltering wall. Larr Gith swept him into her arms, turned his back to the wall, and started kissing him, hard. He didn’t smell at all bad. She clapped her hands to the side of his head and reflected that, damn, it had been a long time.

“Ng,” said Indo Zal, starting to push at her stomach. A second later it seemed to occur to him to stop kissing. “I th…th…”

“Yes?” Larr Gith asked his mouth. He wasn’t half bad once he got over the shock. It was a problem Larr Gith saw a lot of in her life.

“I think they’re gone,” he squeaked.

“Oh.” She pushed away from his twisty little body. She looked over her shoulder. The Knights had moved on. “Right, then.” She let Indo Zal go. “I have always wanted to do that.”

He looked at her breasts, then her forehead, then her eyes for about two seconds before canting away. “I c-can tell. Isn’t your order supposed to be celibate?”

“What’s a rule without a few exceptions?”

“Er, law, generally speaking.”

Larr Gith dismissed the line of reasoning with a gesture. “I need to find out where Princess Vaylin is going. And you can help me.”

He didn’t look surprised. “My influence is much reduced since the Outlander first came here and I was caught aiding her. I have rebel connections who may be able to help. Anything I can do for the Alliance.”

“And, through them, for Zakuul.”
Indo Zal put a hand on his chest and gave a courtly little bow. “There you have it.”

Well-groomed and cooperative. What more could one ask? Larr Gith smiled sweetly. “You and I are going to get along.”

*

There were three analysts on duty. Wynston kept his back to them, and checked their reflections in the big screens, and only even thought about his flask when they were all intent on their stations. One sip wouldn’t be that bad. Wynston shoved the thought aside. He’d had enough for this hour anyway. It was just hard, being the only command staff in the facility. If he had been better to them, to all of them, would they still be here? …No, forget that.

The door from the long hallway opened. Wynston checked the holdout blaster in the other side of his jacket. But it was just Rylon Niral.

The boy looked pale, like his father, and tired, somewhat like his mother. And anxious, which was all him.


The boy closed the door behind himself and took in the cavernous ops center with big eyes. “Is all this for Mom?”

“In a manner of speaking. All the Alliance’s work goes through here. Lately, that means supporting your mother.”

“I tried to help,” whispered Rylon. “I had a vision, but it wasn’t enough.”

“You and me both, my friend. Here, look at this.” He pressed a control and the big board morphed into a map of the galaxy. He zoomed in on the box that best fit Zakuul, Ephel, and a few others.

“Look at the diamonds,” he said. “Larr Gith’s ship, en route to Zakuul. Tebbitth and Koth on Tython. Theron…en route. And Lana’s last known.” He pointed to Zakuul, where the named diamond shone.

“Mom’s not there?” said Rylon.

He found the last diamond as maddening as the missing one. “I don’t have the means of tracking her. As soon as she surfaces she goes on this map.”

“What was the thing that was up here before?”

“Alliance business. Emergencies. I’m managing traffic for a little while. I want your mother to have an Alliance to come home to.”

“Oh. You’ll show me the map when you hear from her?”

“Yes.”

Rylon chewed his lip. “Don’t you want to be out there finding?”

Of course he did. “Someone once told me, a man has to be more than the sum of what he wants.” He touched his jacket without meaning to. “Maybe the good men are.”
Then he looked back at the big board. There were numbers, names, shorthand updates, crises blossoming all over the screen. Ruth was gone. Lana was gone. Larr Gith, Koth, Tebbith, and Theron had scattered on the theory that asking the same question enough times would eventually yield an answer…out there. He was out of friends, and this hour was going by very slowly. “Stay as long as you like,” he said to Rylon. “That seat’s free. If you have questions, ask them. I’ll be here.”

*

Tython was startling. The Temple Tebbith brought Koth through was broad and high and gracious and ancient, like some of Zakuul’s finest monuments…but where Zakuulian guards kept monuments gleaming pristine, the Temple was living, from the vines without to the streams of whispering people within. Tebbith greeted many people by name, and Koth at his side waved, too. Tebbith touched him now and then, small guiding nudges. The occasional Jedi stopped for introductions, which Tebbith gave wholly unselfconsciously.

He really meant it. He really meant he didn’t mind being seen with this Zakuulian castoff who was busy shredding his most dearly held principles.

Tebbith passed out of the temple and down a grassy path to a console freestanding in a sun-dappled glade. “This will do,” he said. “I regret that Ephel’s archive has no windows…that’s better for the artifacts, but one loses something when all the live things are trapped on the other side of a stone wall.”

Koth looked at him. “So here’s where you get it,” he said.

“Get what?”

“Peace. That thing I want so much I fight for it. It…suits you here.” He looked around at the trees, took in the birdsong. “Don’t let me distract you.”

“Right. Planets, people, and perturbations surrounding the Emperor…particularly Ziost, on one corner of the timeline, and whatever he rose from at the other. I’ve been through all this before, but…maybe some new combination will come to my attention.”

“Let me know how I can help.”

“Hm. Stand here and get exposed to my thinking out loud for several hours, I’m afraid. I’ll understand if you prefer to go sit indoors while I do that part.”

“The view’s better here.” Koth leaned against a tree and crossed his arms over his chest. Everything here was…right. He found himself hoping a solution to other people’s problems wouldn’t happen instantly.

Not a big delay. Just a little one. The Zabrak’s lips moved when he navigated the major menus. The sunlight made his tattoos shift in an airy and varying pattern, like he was just one of the trees, rooted and natural.

*

Hours later, Tebbith’s plumbing of the Jedi Archives had come up with very little. Whispers of a name, but nothing that came up on star charts. The Emperor’s secrets were still safe.

Which led him to the mission nobody had told him to do. “Koth,” he said, “let’s return to the
question of imprisonment. Once the Emperor is contained we can pursue his history at our leisure.”

Koth looked up from his datapad. “I’m still catching up on things you said five minutes ago. You don’t mess around with the information hose.”

“Too much?” Tebbith said anxiously.

Koth half smiled. “I didn’t say that.”

“You…flirt with me, sometimes.”

“I do. Does that go on the official record?”

“I don’t think I could stop you.”

Inquiries rolled on. Tebbith was in his element in at least one of the day’s activities. He couldn’t bring his friends the answer they had requested, but he might bring them one that was good enough.

*

Wynston decrypted the recording the moment he got it. He checked that Rylon was still asleep in the corner, then took it in the conference room, which was eerily empty. The Alliance truly had fallen apart.

Ruth came up. She looked haggard, but her posture was rigidly upright. “Wynston,” she said. “I'm sorry to do this to you, but...it would destroy Theron and I don't trust anyone else.”

His heart was hammering just below his throat. The recorded image of Ruth cleared her own throat and struggled on. “If...I should die. You know what? Doesn’t unlock the rest of this until…until you know I’m not coming back. Please. Just let it alone until then. Please, don't answer this, it only gets harder when you send me messages. Good luck.”

The remaining encryption was bulky but inexpert. Wynston unlocked the rest of it. He couldn’t respect her wishes if there was the smallest chance she had offered some clue to her plans.

“Okay. If you’re here, I’m not.” Ruth Niral, slim, fair in grey, paused. “And I'm sorry I failed you. I can only hope that if you’re viewing this it’s because you killed him in my absence. Wynston, it has been my privilege and joy to be your lover of old and your friend since, all these years. I never forgot a moment.” A small smile, but he knew its warmth even through the washed-out holo. “You did everything right. I'm sorry I couldn't do better. Now...for the administrative stuff. You were always good at that. I would...prefer that you take over the Alliance. I know it's out of my hands, but you have my blessing. I trust your judgment; use your discretion in who to support.”

She gave up and hugged her lean frame. He found himself mirroring the pose. “I want you to destroy my body. Burn it. Don't let anyone or anything use it. If I'm gone...don't let people die while you try to scrape my brain out of what's left. If he wins, eradicate my remains. I wish I didn't have to ask that...but you're the strongest person I ever met, and you understand what's at stake.”

“No,” he said. She'd met a mirror, hadn’t she? His responsibility was to the living. To her. That was his whole job. If there were a scrap of her left, stars, the smallest movement of the corner of her mouth, anything, he’d be there for it.

She kept going. “Now, then... Rylon must not go to Korriban. I'd like his father to have access, visits or something, maybe partial custody if Rylon ever forgives him...I would say full custody,
but he must not go to Korriban. Make him promise.

“What else…what else matters? My assets go to Theron. One ship, one pile of dirty laundry…a few lightsabers.” She smiled bleakly. “Be kind to him. So many people have given up on him already.” She rushed to cover her mouth with her gloved hand, and for a moment her features screwed up as if losing control. She mastered herself, though, and instead of covering her mouth she reached out to the air at waist height. “The rest of the Alliance will get on without me. I just wanted someone to know.

“I’ll send things to Theron and Rylon, once…once I know what to say. I’ll have better words for you, too, not just a list of demands. I will always be your friend, Wynston. I will always be grateful, and I know it’s cruel of me to ask, but believe me, these are the last things I will ever ask you for. And now…if I’m gone, maybe I can finally stop fighting.” Her voice softened, and her eyes unfocused. “I never really believed that day would come. I always thought hell was having nothing to fight for.” She looked up sharply. “Regardless, as of me recording this, that day isn’t here yet. Someday it will be, someday when you see this, so…stars, I wish I could record enough to keep you company for years, but I don’t know the words and you would get tired of it…so, goodbye.”

He let his hand fall away from that of her holo image.

He watched it over again, and over, memorizing every quaver, every barely-controlled breath, desperately reminding himself that he had opened it early, that it wasn’t true yet. He drank a silent toast to the hesitant holo, over and over. At some point he realized that the alcohol had ceased to dull his emotions, was indeed filling and buoying and amplifying, but here, alone and impotent, what else could he do?

She had no idea what he would pay to save her. She had rescued him from his mind trap, years ago. Surely he could return the favor. As an Imperial he understood the grim calculation. As a person, as the man he had become with her at his side, he refused to accept it.

He reached for her hand, every time.

*

“I want you to know that I’m practically sober,” said Wynston.

Lana looked at the recording on her holo in mute horror. Wynston had his usual alert poise but his hands were moving restlessly and he wasn’t in the habit of half shouting assertions that were true.

The console Lana had sliced in her hotel room was still issuing white noise in audio and electromagnetic forms. She probably didn’t have much time outside Scythia’s attention; she seriously doubted the woman actually slept while she had guests nearby. But this place was as secure as she could make it, and Scythia might only figure out that Lana was taking a call. She let the recording play on at low volume.

“I had to be…slightly prepared…to make this call.” His enunciation was just a little too correct. “Lana, I do not want to say anything that suggests you owe me something. And I don’t want to demand your time, your whereabouts, whether you’re happy…whether you’re happier out there than you were here. I’m not explaining this well. I need to understand why you left and you’re the last woman I can ask. So I can make up reasons. None of them sound like you. I could never close in on how you work.
“Obviously.

“This isn't about her. I never meant it to come to this with her. She’s out of the picture anyway, possibly for good – and she knows it. I should never have come between you. If I were good enough you would have stayed as the loyal opposition. You shone in that role. She needed you. But you don't owe her anything, obviously. Nor me. I betrayed you when the crisis came. That wipes out any...anything between us, and I don’t know if you care to hear this but I am sorry. It’s a vicious thing, to be alone. I know that now."

His enunciation was gradually getting worse. “I…miss you. I’m not blaming you. It is what it is. Scythia…was your choice. I can’t demand your reasons.

“Everything’s gone wrong here. Not because you’re gone, but you’d be faster to fix it. We’re losing people one by one, one by…and I can’t recall them. I just hate that it had to start with the person I…no. You don’t want to hear that.”

This went on for upwards of five minutes before the vicarious humiliation ended. Lana kept watching the holo for a long time after, wondering whether it would resume and dreading every word. Wynston squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hands to his mouth as if to silence himself, a few minutes too late, before his picture finally cut out.

She wasn’t sure what to say that wouldn’t hand the fact of Wynston’s addiction to Scythia, assuming the demon didn’t already know. She settled for logging into an Alliance network and pulling a few files Scythia might find useful. If she accidentally left a tiny encrypted file next to the originals, well, who but Theron would notice? Scythia has your background. Wynston has started again. It had to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

That's it, ice cream and therapy dogs for everybody.
Chapter Summary


The slim Human traced the cybernetics at her temple and grinned. “Trawling through planetloads of only-barely-varying data for a single instance of a blip that you’re not one hundred percent is the blip you want? Boss, you give me the best jobs.”

“Vette, Mako,” said Calline. The Nar Shaddaa cantina was quieter than most; it was closer to an Imperial enclave around a data conduit that people weren’t supposed to know about, too obscure to be profitable and too utilitarian to be glamorous. But the three women and the green astromech occupied a table without much worry. “Mako, this is Vette. She knows my brother.”

“What, that’s my entire resume?” said Vette. “Nice to meet you.”

“Welcome to Nar Shaddaa,” Mako said brightly.

“Oh, Nar Shaddaa and me go way back.”

“Even better! Who’s the target today?”

“A friend,” said Vette.

“A friend,” agreed Calline.

“A mutual friend,” said Vette.

“The Outlander,” said Calline.

Mako spat out her drink. “The what?”

“If she took off or landed. Anywhere in the galaxy. We need to know.”

Mako smiled coyly. “How’s Teefive?”

The astromech beeped.

Calline patted its top disc. “Doing her part at top speed. But she’s not you.”

“Do I get to catch up first? How’s Gault? How’s everyone?”

Calline gave a quick summary of Gault and Torian’s dealings with the Alliance. Thriving, both of
them, with lots to do to tickle one’s wallet and the other’s honor. Just the way things should be.

“Blizz is doing great. Are you in town long? Do you need a tinkerer?”

“That depends who else we run into,” said Calline.

“You know this the most words I have ever heard out of you?” said Vette. “Ever?”

Mako laughed, a silvery fall punctuated by a snort. “That’s Calline for you. All right, let’s get fed. Then we do our jobs.”

Calline raised her glass, clinked with Vette and Mako, and took a deep, comfortable pull.

*

Tebbith waited until Larr Gith showed up on holo.

“Vaylin has not been sighted in five days,” he said. “According to my reading –” he set down a stack of datapads next to the holoprojector – “this is not normal behavior for her.”

“You read that?” said Larr Gith.

“You recommended it. To help you with your search.”

“I thought you would skim…you know what, that’s fine. What about you?”

“I got information on Tython. Nothing directly applicable, except for an inquiry Dr. Oggurobb directed me to. I’m on Èphel overseeing preparations, some of our workmen here are very skilled. But what about you?”

“I did get you our entire history with the princess bitch. She’s been tearing around calling Ruth ‘Father’ for a long time now. She may be one of the only people who can separate Ruth and Valkorion.”

“She doesn’t know how to, unless there is a family heirloom that will do. She is no arcanist and certainly no healer. I am confused as to what her education is. She is certainly a formidable fighter but she routinely flees rather than engaging. Her kinetic talents are stunning but she puts herself in settings where she is guaranteed to do herself harm. She has succeeded in forcing the allegiance of the Eternal Fleet but uses them only to prove that she is a dismal strategist. She was forced into mental conditioning to suppress her talents and yet has done nothing we can see to break that conditioning. I don’t understand this woman, and increasingly I’m not certain I need to.”

“You don’t think our way to Valkorion is through Vaylin.”

“I’m afraid not. If Valkorion had ever evidenced the faintest shadow of concern about her – did Ruth ever mention something like that?”

“According to her Valkorion only speaks of his children as failures to be removed.”

“A tragic fate. Vaylin carries his disdain, then. But not his trust, and not his essential nature.” He turned his head and ran his hands up over his horns, two four six eight ten, soothing. “I regret that she may not surrender.”

Larr Gith stifled a laugh. “No. I don’t think she will.”
“The Outlander had hoped to save her brother.”

“Yeah, and that hope got Odessen slagged. Let’s not do that again.”

“I wish I could interview Ruth,” said Tebbith. “Perhaps my background would lead to insights into Valkorion’s behavior.”

“Do you have a degree in Millennium Old Undead Devil Monster?”

Tebbith’s shoulders hunched. “Not as such, Master Larr.”

Larr Gith’s amber eyes gleamed. “Sorry. That was cheap.”

“Master Larr?”

“Yes, Teb?”

“I will of course pursue Valkorion with Captain Vortena. But when Vaylin is found. I would like to help subdue her.”

Larr Gith looked up at him. “Some jobs are messy, Teb.”

“I believe my skills can be of use. One of the things I found on Tython was a possible path to restraining her.”

“It’s not subdual. It’s a kill job.”

“For what crime? Being powerful and abused? She has no other traits to call her own. How is she so different from the woman we follow? Born to power and forced to use it? Vaylin has nothing more to fall back on. She’s not like you and me and even the Outlander. No one ever gave her a chance.”

“I was really thinking killing her for putting dozens of planets to the torch to deal with her frustration. Billions dead, Teb. That’s past being misunderstood.”

“She must be stopped, yes.” Tebbith buried his hands in his sleeves and tucked his chin to his chest. He took a deep breath. “I will take the Outlander’s lead.”

“Will you know it’s her talking?”

“I will. I must. If it is the will of the Force.”

“You’re usually more comforting when you say that.”

“Master Larr.” He smiled weakly. “I must earn my keep.”

*

Ruth avoided the populated systems. If her ship passed through any kind of formal control the Alliance would be on her in hours.

Odessen looked largely intact outside the deep gap where the settlement had been. Ruth could even touch down only a few miles away, but the drab little ship and modest camp were gone. Satele Shan had moved on.
She tugged Theron’s jacket more securely around her. “Marr?” she said, just in case.

“You’re expecting someone?” came a voice behind her.

She whirled, hands on sabers. The speaker was a towering Sith Pureblood in bulky black armor. Deliberately he drew one lightsaber and activated it: rich red, solid in stillness, arc-bright in motion. Then he raised his other hand to one side and activated what looked like glowing red knuckles, short spikes from between each finger on his off hand.

“You,” came the voice in her soul.

It wasn’t even her moving. She activated. They charged.

“Stop it,” she groaned. Valkorion was behind her, in her, making her saber strikes heavy but clumsy. Apparently finesse was not something his control could assert.

“No,” said the stranger.

“Who are you?” she said while she tested the speed – good – and reach – considerable – of her physical opponent’s defenses. His off hand deftly blocked and redirected her saber. Almost as bad as a proper shield.

Worse, if he got a swing in with it.

“You are the Emperor’s Wrath,” the Sith said calmly while he whirled her around, started pulling the fight toward a sturdy tree.

“Former,” she said, swinging around to get to its shelter first. She tried not attacking and her arm slashed without her. “Wait – you’re him. Scourge. The Emperor’s Wrath.”

He locked his main hand against hers and leaned in, grimacing. “Former.”

She didn’t even know what to flex to restore her limbs to herself. Her body fought. “Tire me out. I’m not kidding. I’ll slow down and talk if you just wear me down first.”

“If you were talking about anyone else I would call that a very random lie.”

Valkorion tried to shove her arms into Makashi forms, ancient, formal, a duelist’s style: he was better at it than she was. She kept it. In Juyo she could probably take this Sith apart in two minutes. Here she just needed to defend herself until that hideous rebellion of her limbs ended.

“If you do not begin cooperating,” said Valkorion in her head, “I will make you suffer.”

She executed a few stabs that should have managed to hit something in that hulk. “How did you find me?”

“The Wrath has ways and means, as you well know.” Scourge broke away and circled.

Ruth stayed on guard. “We don’t know whether killing me will stop him.”

Scourge stopped instantly. He took a step back. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

She fought the forward step with all her might. “I mean he didn’t come with a user’s manual. If you kill me, he might break out like on Yavin.” She fought the next one. “Or jump into the next available host. Like you.”
“I have never borne his full will before.”

“You’re welcome to it.”

Valkorion seethed. “Kill him.” Ruth realized that his last order hadn’t actually moved her arm. Her body was slowly un-numbing. And then, in a crackling groan, he was gone.

She kept up her guard. “But like I said. We can’t guarantee.”

“Then what are you doing here? What efforts are being made?” Scourge lowered his saber and growled deep in his throat. “Where is Larr Gith?”

“She will be so. Pleased. That that was the first thing you asked.”

“I can imagine. Where is she? Why are you here and not removing the Emperor from your mind?”

“I’m trying! Look, if you know anything about the Emperor’s immortality that I don’t…”

“Let me guess. ‘What you don’t know’ encompasses everything.”

“I did mention the user’s manual.”

Scourge stared at her.

“Deactivate your sabers and I will,” said Ruth.

Scourge looked her over. “Why?”

There wasn’t time to collapse, to fall apart at the foot of Valkorion’s violation. She couldn’t mourn, she couldn’t even scream, there was just too much to do. Far, far too much.

And this man was going to help her do it. Or he would die. But knowing that Valkorion wanted him silenced…that was invaluable. The enemy of her enemy might yet save her life.

“I need your expertise more than I need another notch on the saber hilt.” All she knew about this man was that Larr Gith resented him. Given how few people were influential enough to earn her resentment…well. Lord Scourge knew things, and Ruth was desperate for a clue, for anything.

She deactivated her sabers. “Please.”

“Your hatred lights up the sky.” He doused his fist. “Matched only by something…hard to describe. You are committed to destroying him? You must be. You cannot use him.”

Guilt lanced through her. “I know,” she said hoarsely. If only…for a few days more, maybe, he couldn’t use her, either.

“Then I will help you.” The long saber hummed and vanished. “Lead the way.”

*

Theron did the hardest thing imaginable. He went home empty-handed.

Ops was busy. A lot of people Theron knew, none of them looking happy, though a few did acknowledge him with a nod. In front of the big board Wynston stood at parade rest, watching. His
eyes were sunken, his fingertips twitching at the small of his back. He stood like he’d been there since the dawn of time without blinking.

“Sir,” said an analyst, “it’s about Torian’s recruits. They’re trying to–”

“Stage them on Naboo until I get to them,” said Wynston. “Like I told you…”

“You didn’t…” her voice dwindled out. It came back as crisp as Imperial Intelligence. “Sir. Yes, sir. I’ll get it done.”

“Balmorra, sir,” said another. “Did the Corellia contingent manage to bring any–”

“I don’t know.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Run the numbers. Without Corellia. You’re an analyst, analyze. Tell me when you have a result.”

“Wynston,” said Theron.

“Theron,” said Wynston, looking up at the board. “Welcome back. Any news?”

“No. I was just thinking, home is too big an assignment for one person, so…”

“So Lana called you. Shortly before returning to her dealings with Darth Scythia.” Every negative facial expression the man had suppressed since Theron knew him seemed to be trying to cross his face at once. “There was something I was supposed to…something I was trying to…”

Theron gave him time.

Wynston punched the console blindly. “Yes. I’ve had some news. Tebbith has found a lead that might allow us to imprison Ruth away from the Force. It takes some specialty materials, but she’d be able to come home.”

It surprised Theron, how enormous that relief was. “That is the best news I’ve had all year.”

Wynston still looked grim. “Have you…heard from her?”

“No.”

“I see. Lucky you.”

Theron couldn’t begin to guess what that meant. He reached out for the shorter man’s wiry upper arm. It got him close enough to confirm the alcohol, intensely. “Get some sleep,” he said.

Wynston stared back. Somehow Theron had underestimated the depth of pain possible in red eyes. “They’re out there,” Wynston croaked.

“And we’ll bring them home. If I get a whisper, I’ll wake you. Get some sleep.” Wynston was the one really qualified to run things here; it was his picked staff, his Intelligence managerial training, his knack for inspiring conspirators. Theron was more of a field guy. Still, even the best of them had to sleep sometime, and that meant someone had to watch the place.

Wynston laid a hand over Theron’s as if trying to trap what little comfort it provided. “I’m better than this,” he said lucidly. “Usually.”

“I know. Go. Wash up. Eat something. Dump the bottle. Sleep. I promise, you and I will be the first people to act on any news. Any news at all.”
Wynston let his hand fall. He nodded stiffly, looked around ops like a pearl at the oyster that had created it, and walked out.

Theron wasn’t blind to the looks around the room. Looks of relief, mostly. Had Wynston just been standing there disintegrating for the last…days? Rylon was curled up in the corner, seemingly sound asleep. Theron didn’t have the heart to move him. Didn’t they all want to be that close to incoming news?

She was out there. Given the slightest lead he would interrupt Wynston’s sleep and take the closest ship no matter who owned it. She was out there, and all he had here in ops were answers to questions he hadn’t asked.

Still, he would try not to snap at them.

*

Tebbith knelt with Rylon and Sana-Rae. It wasn’t ideal, but the primary Sith were out and this needed doing. According to the records Tebbith had found, it was possible to imprison a Sith who was stronger than the one who had built the cage. That’s what preparation and ritual got you.

Sana-Rae was her usual magenta glow, calm and fatalistic. Rylon had settled into surprisingly clean-cut channels, emotional but not uncontrolled. Tebbith studied him for a moment. Love, yes, not broad and not theoretical…attachments, to Sana-Rae, most of all to the missing Ruth, that didn’t devour.

Tebbith kind of wanted to take notes, but the boy wouldn’t understand why.

“You’ve all had the chance to study the ritual,” said Tebbith.

“Can Mom come home when we get this?” said Rylon.

“Yes.” The boy’s Force presence quivered. “Don’t worry. There is peace.”

“Peace is a lie.”

Ah, the…adventures…of differing creeds. “Through passion, strength, strength, power, power, victory. That is what we will earn today.” Such a woefully limited view, but the Outlander insisted on some lessons.

Rylon looked right back, as if reading Tebbith’s concerns. “She could die out there. For real this time.”

“There is no death. There is the Force. I know she doesn’t like me saying that but it’s true. Let the Force guide you. Take my hand, please. We’re going to give her the safest home there is.”

*

It was hours later that the kid and the Voss got up. Tebbith stood and walked into the chamber. “All right,” he said, “activate it.”

Koth hadn’t understood a second of the ritual Tebbith had supposedly just conducted, but he waved the workmen back and faced the control panel outside the cell. Good work for three days’ notice. It was deep in the basement of Ephel’s temple, a place that was creepy even after Tebbith’s reported
cleansing. It was carved out of the brown and white jumble stone, maybe seven meters by four, open all along one side to the high cold hallway, internally appointed with necessaries for living and a cushy living room setup besides.

Koth hit the two simultaneous buttons. The red forcefield sprung up between his station and Tebbith’s face.

The Jedi joined his hands over his chest and sank his chin, concentrating. The jitters started in his forehead.

His jaw twitched. “Hold on,” he said shakily to no one. He shuddered all over. “It is…strong. The ritual worked. I…no. No, get me out. Let me out!” The whites of his eyes showed as he took one long stride to the forcefield and punched it, recoiling when he met its surface. “Let me out!”

Koth hit the two-button release. The forcefield vanished. Tebbith sagged forward, hugging himself. “Master Tebbith?” Rylon said. Sana-Rae set a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey!” said Koth. “Hey. Hey. It’s okay. Look at me. You’re okay.” He didn’t wait for permission to take Tebbith’s arms and squeeze them. “You’re all right.”

“That will hold a Force user, even of my strength,” said Tebbith. “I would much prefer that we never have to use it.”

“Tebbith?”

“Koth?”

“You are free. Right this minute. You’ll be okay.”

Tebbith set his big hands on Koth’s shoulders, looked into his eyes, and sighed. “Yes,” he said, and managed a shy smile. “I like that in your voice.”

“You’ll like it even better when we get our mutual friend home.”

“Can I try?” said Rylon.

“No, you…” it was knowledge Rylon wanted…”I suppose you can,” said Tebbith. “Step in.”

The boy did. Tebbith activated the forcefield. Rylon looked all around, then bounced on his toes. “Wow. Is this what it’s like to be normal?”

“Does that not hurt?” said Tebbith.

“It’s weird. Like I got a phantom limb, I try to move it but it doesn’t do anything.” He wrinkled his nose. “Mom won’t like it.”

“Agreed,” said Tebbith, and let him out. “I hesitate to recommend this. It’s like losing vision, or hearing. She won’t like the experience.”

“Yes,” said Koth, “but we’ll all be alive to not enjoy it together.”

“Well, then. Let’s see whether we can’t bring her home.” Tebbith drew himself up to his considerable height and wiped his hands together. “I have grown…fond, of her, despite our differences.”
“You believe in her.”

“I do.”

So did Wynston. So did Theron. So did Larr Gith, in a backwards way. “She…isn’t exactly what I wanted for Zakuul.”

“When she is free, we’ll be able to chart a future for all your people.”

No Emperor, fine, even Zakuulian expatriates he’d spoken to didn’t want that, and no easy answers in his wake. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be new. Okay. Let’s manage this.”

*

The Zakuulian resistance had gotten Larr Gith access to one of the science facilities of Zakuul. This one held the royal family’s black projects. Larr Gith, naturally, blustered her way in.

She was dealing with some engineer who had had the misfortune of being near the door. “I require ze empress's location!” she trilled. “Zis matter will not wait! Ze entirre development of ze prroject hangs in ze balance!”

“Ma’am,” said the unhappy engineer. “Who are you-”


T7-01 beeped. <This plan = terrible>

“Ze Death Mark, and be quick about it!”

T7-01 brought up a holo image. A figure shot another figure with a strange blaster. Seconds later a brilliant shaft of light reduced the targeted figure to a pile of holographic ash.

“Do you see?” hyperventilated Larr Gith. “I am ze artist and destruction is my medium! Ze princess commissioned me especially for her grrrand entrance, ze crrown jewel…but this work requires me to model from her, and quickly! Unless,” she leaned in, “you wish to be rrresponsible for a second, poor, showing?”

That got through. “Let me talk to my people,” said the engineer, and scurried off.

Larr Gith turned up her nose at the others. “No vun understands a genius in her own time.”

T7-01 beeped encouragingly. <Hero Jedi = look // Answer = available // Bitch Princess = find>

Larr Gith smiled. “And who better to do it than a bitch queen?”

*

Ruth scanned subject lines on her messages, but she couldn't bring herself to open any. If it was important enough...well, they’d find a way.

She sat on the edge of the pilot’s seat, elbows on knees, leaning forward. Lord Scourge sat not far away, seat spun to face her. His elbows were also on his knees. His hands were cradling his face.
“That’s what she told you?” he groaned.

“Well, that’s what she got between bouts of me walking in the other direction while humming loudly.” The full story of Larr Gith’s heroism against the Emperor had been long in the telling. Long, and repeated.

“Truly, she brings out the most mature in all of us.” Scourge rubbed his eyes and looked over at Ruth. “But she resisted the Emperor. A lonely virtue, but a necessary one.”

“Tell me what she didn’t. Tell me how it was so easy. Tell me how to chase him out for good.”

“‘It does not benefit anyone to ‘chase him’ to a new host. He must be burned out of you in whole. The Jedi labored under his fingertip. You hold his entirety.’ Scourge pressed his lips together and seemed to think. “Among the three of us, I think I prefer what he did to me.”

“But you served him for three hundred years. You know something about what made him dangerous. What made him immortal.”

“Ah.” He was always so calm. “Now there’s a question no one has asked me in a very long time.”

“What made him immortal?”

“The same thing that made him corporeal on Ziost. The devouring of a planet.”

Ruth’s heart seized. “He did that before?”

“I can show you.” Scourge’s eyes gleamed. “Follow the coordinates I give you. The Emperor earned his life on Nathema.”

*

She had it. She had a place to go.

Ruth’s holo beeped. It was Theron. She cast about desperately within herself, wondering whether Valkorion would surge back for this. She centered herself and she answered.

He came up looking well-groomed if tired.

“Theron, stop.” But she didn’t hang up.

“Ruth, I’m inside a custom built room Tebbith helped research. It suppresses the Force but, strangely enough, it lets holo signals through. You can’t kill me over this line.”

Her burden sighed and rested. “I’m glad,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Uh, a few things.” He passed his hand over his hair and looked down. “Things are going to come out about my past. I want you to be prepared, but there’s no time. I wish…there’s no time.”

“Will anything really make me think less of you?”

“I like to believe I’ve kept a clean slate. We all screw up, some of us more than others. But no. There’s nothing I’m desperate to hide from you. I just want you to know, I’ve been a secret agent and I’ve seen a lot of things, not all of which I’ve been able to stop.”
“I understand. Really.”

“Fine. Point two. I…” He looked up, eyes haunted. “Huh. I didn’t think I would feel like this when I saw you again.”

“I owe you an apology.”

“You think?” he said, too loudly. “You went for the fight of your life without me! You knew I would follow you to hell and back and you tied me up rather than let me help you. You used your power over me, power you promised never to use. All so you could get yourself killed without the muss and fuss of getting your coddled mental image of me dented.”

“I’m not saving my image of you, I’m saving your life! Theron, I had to do what I did alone.”

“No. You are never alone. You never have to be alone. You never have to face anything alone. Why do you think I asked you to marry me?”

She cringed at the mention of marriage in that tone of voice. “I know.”

“Then why did you leave me?”

“Because the deadliest infestation in the galaxy is in my head, I’m afraid he’ll force me to use my power against you in a much, much more lethal capacity, and I can’t think straight being surrounded by people I might betray at any time. You have to be in a cage just to face me, because maybe you can trust me but you can’t trust the thing in me. I can’t breathe, Theron. And if you were out of that cage, neither would you.”

“I know all that. I know that! But I should be there. We need to be able to trust each other. You always decide who’s worth saving and you save them without consulting us, without asking whether it affects us. It does. Don’t save me, Ruth. Let me be me.”

“I’m sorry.” She looked away. “I thought about killing you. I thought about that, and I had to leave. Theron, please believe me. I want you to trust me. I want that trust to be justified. I want you.”

“I know.” He set his hands on his hips and looked aside as if seeking an answer they hadn’t covered. “But you don’t get to walk away a second time. Come home.”

“Does that mean it isn’t broken now?” she said in a small voice.

“It’s going to take time.”

It wasn’t a no. “I understand.”

“You know,” he laughed shakily, “I remember. On Yavin. You were captured by the Massassi, at least I thought you were. I went out to rescue you, only to watch you rip the cage to shreds and kill the high priest that’d come to take you away. You never…never needed anyone. Ruth, at least let me believe that there’s some day and time and place where you do.”

“Hanging up now counts as walking away,” she said with difficulty.

“A second time. Yeah.”

“Nathema,” she whispered.

“What?”
“Nathema. I’m still dangerous but I should be able to find some answers there. I can’t ask you to come. But I do realize that there’s a limit to the things I can protect you from. If that’s what it takes…now you know.”

“Hang on. You’re going to have backup.”

Please, she thought. Don’t. But he was right. He was qualified to help, just as soon as she got herself under control. They could do anything together, as long as she could keep the third party restrained. He could run any risk, as long as she didn’t give in to the shadow’s guarantee.

Stars, it was almost good enough.
The Alliance converges on Nathema. Calline gets an assignment. The Alliance clashes with Vaylin. Scythia's plan springs into motion.

Larr Gith shook her hair free and brushed imaginary dust from her sleeves. Kiwiiks the weapons genius had served her purpose: the empress had a destination and, disturbingly, it was the one Ruth was on her way to. “Teeseven? Anything at those coordinates?”

<Planet = listed as uninhabitable // Warnings = dire>

“So, Emperor City.” She tossed her golden hair. “Somebody really ought to stop him.”

*  
The planet was hollow. Ruth felt it like gravity gone wrong. It wasn’t quite Ziost; some shreds of the Force had come back here, few and wispy, the closest thing to healing this planet might ever know.

“I can shield you from the maddening effects of what little Force remains here,” said Valkorion.

“Shut up,” said Ruth.

“A madwoman cannot take the throne. Reconsider.”

“No.”

She felt the effort inside her, as wrong within her as the Force was within this planet. She steeled her will, her grasp, powerful even when there was nothing left to hold. She was not his. She reached in herself, in Korriban, in the Dromund Kaas of exile, in every world she had touched, her errands, her choices. She felt the whole of herself, and rejected everything that wasn't.

“No,” she said.

“As you wish,” he said, and subsided.

It was just her. Maybe for a second, maybe for a month, but it was just her. She stopped to laugh. It aired out parts of her that had been closed in darkness for far too long. Ruth opened the ship’s ramp, stepped over the mouse droid, and let her laugh ring down a lightless ravine.

<You = going alone?> the mouse droid chirped.

“Arguably,” said Ruth. “Stay safe. No one nice will come for you here, except me.”
Calline didn’t realize the recording was there until hours after it was sent. It was the Outlander. “I need a job done,” she said firmly. “Discreet. Dangerous. Double your rate. I need you to go to the coordinates I’ll specify on Zakuul. If I don’t come after three days, get the hell out of there. Holo me yes or no, but I do expect that you can accommodate.”

Calline looked at Vette. Vette looked at Calline.

“I can trace that,” said Mako.

“We’re on for finding Ruth,” said Vette. “We got word from Theron. That means Nathema.”

“Double,” said Calline. “And everybody’s going to Nathema. She needs prep on Zakuul.”

“How exactly are we going to ‘prep’ Zakuul?”

Mako chuckled. “I’m staying with the ship this time. We are not having a repeat of Duros.”

Calline smiled. “This and that.”

“You two are crazy,” said Vette. “You know that, right?”

“Takes one to know one. Siddown.”

Ruth walked down the dark ravine. Grey stone rose and fell in all directions, topped by a layer of dust that Ruth’s every step troubled into unquiet ghosts.

There was a high black building a few klicks away. Ruth went that way.

The air moved only enough to accentuate the dead stone. Ruth felt the wrongness here. She had felt something much like it on Ziost. The difference here was there was enough memory for the Force to be accessible, if only barely. Things started to heal over even interstellar distances, given time.

“Get out,” she said as she walked.

Valkorion’s voice came from everywhere. “No,” he said.

“The Force has no hold here. Get out.”

“Do you think your asking nicely will succeed here where it has failed on every planet you have ever been to? No. You are free of the living Force here. But never free of me.”

“How long can you last here, really?”

“Longer than you. The use of your body will be much easier after you have failed.”

“Keep on waiting.” Ruth approached the black tower. Green light pulsed and subsided within. Someone was here. Vaylin, if Ruth guessed correctly. Well, Valkorion might have to get the satisfaction of seeing the neglected daughter die. Ruth didn’t see a lot of choice.
The Alliance converged on Nathema.

Larr Gith delicately maneuvered her glistening transport and took T7-01 with her. Theron and Wynston, after they agreed on Aygo’s taking the helm for a while, piloted Theron’s personal transport. Tebbith and Koth brought their borrowed vessel.

Calline and Vette were missing, and no one was sure why.

The scans of the surface showed one point of habitation and they landed around the huge black building. It boomed, a tooth-rattling noise every half minute or less.

Larr Gith was looking uncommonly alert, taking in every scene with bright interest. Tebbith looked weary and anxious, and yet something about him was ponderous and steady. Koth beside him had the wary tension of a warrior, no matter what his day job was. Theron had a pretty firm sense that he himself had run through desperation and wrapped back around to brisk confidence, and Wynston beside him looked politely intent. T7-01 spun, and wheeled, and kept his own counsel for the time being.

Larr Gith touched Tebbith’s arm. “We're up,” she said.

Theron stalked forward. Larr Gith gracefully caught up. “My face is sturdier than yours,” she said, “albeit prettier. Let me and Teb take this. If she’s in there...”

“Less talk, more finding Ruth,” grumbled Theron, but he fell in line.

A startlingly well-appointed laboratory took up the entire first floor. A circle of pillars was crowned with green orbs of light – each of which sent a green stream to one small woman in the center. Not Ruth, but then, they would have to deal with the other sometime.

A pillar crumbled. Then two, then three. The screaming was something between piteous and bottomlessly horrible. A fourth. Three left.

“Here goes nothing,” yelled Larr Gith, and flung one of her blue lightsabers to spin into the mess.

Green energy burst in a fountain from where Larr’s blade had hit. The party staggered back from a wave of heat. The bound woman wailed.

“Teb?” said Larr Gith.

“I never hit anything,” said Tebbith.

They didn’t have to. A red saber arced out of the dimness at the far side of the room. “Vaylin,” came a voice, hard and clear. Theron’s heart did its level best to leap out of his chest.

Ruth was back in action.

**

Scythia landed her ship some ways away. Her plan required a little space away from the Force-blinds the Outlander was so fond of. She could cover the distance herself quickly.

Something moved on the main floor of the tall benighted building. It thrummed. Scythia followed her instincts elsewhere: down a spiraling stair and deep underground, where she found a huge vault door.

She tried the Force first. Her mind ached trying to control it here.
“Lana?” she said.

“On it.” The blonde Sith was working at a console that looked like it should have given up and died a thousand years ago.

After all, everything else had.

Lana finished slicing. Scythia let herself into a vault. Not just any vault. The place reeked of ancient power. This was where the Emperor kept his juiciest artifacts, restrained only by the attenuation of the Force here. Truly a paradise.

She had to glean what advantages she could and then get out of here. If Vaylin was dealt with by the time she got topside, that was fine. And if Vaylin wasn’t, Scythia knew how to force the matter.

“Here,” said Lana. “Do you sense this?” She reached for but didn’t touch a brown cube, somewhat less than head size, carved on all sides in a harsh geometric pattern. It was hard to think here, with the Force savaged nearly to death and the pounding energy continuing above, but…yes. The holocron had power. It was comparable in age to things Khem Val had brought her for study, back when he brought her tribute in bloodied claws.

A red saber flashed. Its wielder was only barely perceptible. Scythia ducked and rolled, then came up with her double white blade. Lana had her lightsaber out. The man loomed in the low light. His off hand was crowned in short red spikes. He pressed Scythia back with efficiency, then spun to fend off Lana.

Scythia grabbed the holocron and started concentrating on the upper shelves. The Force was weak but she was strong. “Lana,” she snapped, and started bringing the room down on the stranger.

They ran.

*

“When my daughter is freed,” said Valkorion, “you and your friends will die. Without her conditioning she can defeat you all.” When every touch of the Force was a struggle…would Vaylin’s native power give her an insurmountable advantage? “I can simplify this,” said Valkorion. “Only lend yourself.”

“No.”

“Once, you knelt to me willingly. You wanted me to make things simple again. You submitted.”

“I changed my mind.” Ruth willed time to start again.

“Kneel,” he said, and raised a hand. Purple energy cracked in his fist. Ruth’s legs weakened. “Let me deal with her.”

Across the battlefield waited her friends. Beneath her was a planet he had violated and abandoned a thousand years ago. It was no longer his territory.

No. She would not break.

He returned with asperity. “Why do you still resist?”
“Why do you still try? I will cut you from my mind if I have to scoop it myself. You have no power here, old man.” And as she said it it was true. He couldn’t push her again, not so soon. He couldn’t push her forever. She thought of Theron, and being with him soon.

He flickered. The battle roared back to color.

The last green pillar thundered and fell against Larr Gith’s lightsaber throw. Vaylin in the center fell, staggered, went to one knee. The Force-blinds were already firing.

Droids started pouring out of side doors, each carrying a blaster to yelp at the Alliance.

Vaylin raised a hand. The bolts deflected in all directions. She turned around to face Ruth. “Oh, Outlander,” she yelled. “My little keyword is gone. I think we finally have business to deal with.”

Something tugged at Ruth’s mind. Something about imprisonment, at least until healing. Senya had believed it was possible. “What would you do if I told you you could stand down?”

“I would kill you like an insect in a jar. Do you think I trust the woman who killed my mother and brother?”

The attack was a cloud. Larr Gith whirled in with two flourishing blue blades. Tebbith lifted a black stone block clean out of the floor and sent it arcing towards the center. Ruth charged with two red sabers.

Vaylin stepped as though in a hectic dance. She had a gold lightsaber out but her off hand was the one to watch as purple Force lightning raged and flew. Ruth caught a lash on her lightsaber and pushed in. Vaylin responded by summoning a round storm, purple fire leaping from floor to ceiling and back, scorching Ruth’s side, sending the Force-blinds staggering, seeming to blind Tebbith and wound Larr Gith, and slamming the droids as well. It was only one woman inside all that. Only one woman.

Ruth sprinted and got in three swipes before Vaylin shoved her and the others back. “Is this the best the Alliance has to offer?” she yelled. “I’m embarrassed we haven’t wiped you out yet.”

Ruth pushed through the lash of pain. “Shame is appropriate, yes.”

Larr Gith landed an oblique hit. Vaylin spun, shrieking. And that’s when Lana appeared at Ruth’s side.

“If you’re going to kill me,” snarled Ruth, “I’d appreciate you waiting five minutes.”

“We don’t have much time,” said Lana. “Scythia doesn’t want us talking.”

“I can imagine.”

“She found something in the vault, Ruth. A holocron. I’ve never felt power like it.”

“No whispering in class,” yelled Vaylin, and shot a torso-sized purple blast between them. Ruth went staggering.

Lana recovered better. “Ruth,” she said, “Scythia is going to get away with that holocron while I, or more realistically Vaylin, keeps us all occupied here. She may use that thing against Valkorion but she won’t be trying to preserve you in the process.”

“Do you really think it could remove him?”
“Yes. I believe so.”

“Is this a trap?”

“Let us assume I have blown my credibility. Can you afford to ignore it?”

“Damn it.” Ruth skittered back from Vaylin’s next wild kinetic swing. “Wynston will kill you if I die.”

“You living is the only means I have of getting him back.”

“Fine. Which way?”

Lana pointed. “She hasn’t been gone long.”

If she could think, if the world weren’t so wrong, if Vaylin weren’t so pressing and the battle so noisy, maybe Ruth would have strategized a little more. As it is, with the prospect of a weapon against Valkorion, one that would let her not only stand her ground but gain some, she started running, pushing herself up in huge leaps that left dents each time her boots hit the ground. Screams sounded behind her. She ignored them.

Scythia was visible entering a grey expanse that led, Ruth had to assume, to a vehicle further out. She sped up. Scythia’s head was down and she was at an inhuman sprint, the air parting in a visible shock wave before her.

Lana, she realized, was following close behind, skating above the dusty rocks as though on ice.

Further behind that, someone was shrieking…and keeping up. If Vaylin could be drawn away from everyone else…that might be for the best.

The chase blurred. Ruth sometimes spied footprints in the dust from two pairs of boots en route to the building: Lana and Scythia on the way in.

The first arm of hill cradled the landing spot. The ship was a dumpy freighter with one large cargo bay swelling out of one side. Scythia darted up the open ramp.

Lana closed beside Ruth, and together they raced in as it was closing.

The ramp led directly to a long straight hallway. The cargo bay opened onto it in one long doorway. She had to notice because this was to be her battlefield with Darth Scythia.

About Lana she expected nothing.

*

The freighter pulled up and away. It was going slowly. Scythia’s pilot was a being of broken will. He would do.

Ruth barged down the hallway like an incarnation of one of the greats. Scythia met Ruth’s red blades with a narrow white one. She fought defensively, slashing often but blocking more. She fell back nearly the length of the hallway next to the cargo bay. She waited for Lana to reach her station, then changed her attack. With one titanic effort she shoved Ruth into the cargo bay.

Or tried. Ruth set her feet and resisted and sent a counterattack. Scythia snarled and tried again. When that failed she whirled physically around and began to press the attack. She darted in close enough to touch Ruth’s arm, shocking it hard. This time, with every effort she had in her, Scythia
forced the taller Sith into the hold, sending her sprawling. Her jaw audibly cracked on landing.

Lana slammed the control. The forcefield came up.

“I had to eat a lot of brains to get the power to build this,” said Scythia. “Materials, ritual matters, sheer strength of built or borrowed will… I spared no expense. But it can hold even you.”

Ruth was staggering around on her feet looking as pale as the ghosts that had been scoured from this place. Through a thick layer of padding Scythia could feel her desperate attempts to reach the Force.

“Was the holocron real?” panted Ruth, who was glaring at Lana. “Or did you just make that up to get me here?”

“There is a holocron,” Scythia said patiently. “Which we will discuss. But this isn’t about you. Well, it is, but it’s not. You see, I want Vaylin, but Vaylin only has eyes for you.” She cut her gaze to Lana, who looked like she was chewing something she wanted desperately to spit out. Too late to swallow, she thought, amused. “Thank you for dealing with Arcann, by the way. I didn’t know you, ah, had him in you.” Scythia smirked. “My dear, you wouldn’t have made that call without someone leaning very heavily on you. I would be intrigued to know how heavy. Maybe after I have Vaylin you can negotiate your release. Only on a promise of peace between us, of course.”

Ruth spat blood. “Is this your more effective method, Lana? Is this what you have to do to get the job done?”

Lana took it with a dogged stoicism. “Is this what will work? Everything I said was true.”

“I trusted you! I put my life in your hands so many times...”

“And your life is still there. Safe. Scythia doesn't want you. She wants...”

The bulkhead pounded.

*

The bad guys were running out of droids. Larr Gith kept herself squarely between her idiot enemies and her arguably less idiot friends.

“We need to go,” yelled Theron, again. “I don’t think they outran Vaylin.”

“We could clean up their trail,” Wynston yelled hoarsely. “Where would they be going?”

“I think it’s a moot point,” said Tebbith, pointing. Another door was opening. Another stream of droids.

“This is a distraction,” growled Theron.

“I agree, but how fast can you run?” said Tebbith.

“Then Larr. Master Tebbith. You can go after them.”

“I will not leave you here unprotected,” said Tebbith. “The four who left hate one another. If any two are to ally, it will be Ruth and Lana against the others...”

“Oh, hell,” said Larr Gith. “Fine. I’m going.”
But she didn’t make it in time.

*

They were still low over the ground. The Force, already weak on this planet had been blotted out by the cage. It hurt Ruth’s ears. It hurt her everything.

The bulkhead slammed again, leaving a dent as though from a boulder. Lana looked past the cage and hit a release. In midair the bulkhead opened.

Vaylin swung in.

Lana drew her saber. “Scythia,” she called.

The Human and Mirialan Sith spun into action. Vaylin blocked their initial onslaught, sneering. “Must you two always be in the way? I thought you’d have killed each other by now. Isn’t that what little spiders do?”

The battle was close and claustrophobic. Scythia’s command of Force lightning caught and deflected Vaylin’s efforts time and again while Lana kept her saber in close range.

Vaylin fended Lana off with raw force out of one hand. Raising the other she picked Scythia up, raised her to the ceiling, and dropped her. The Mirialan squeaked.

Lana stabbed. Vaylin sidestepped and shoved the taller Sith back. As Scythia peeled herself off the floor Lana opted for a different tactic.

Lana slammed the release button for the force field and let Ruth and her lightsabers out.

*“What are you doing!” yelled Darth Scythia.

“Stopping her,” said Lana.

The three surrounded Vaylin. She ripped off wall panels, swinging them like huge bladed weapons. The three Sith couldn’t get close. Scythia sent in a powerful stream of Force lightning, which made Vaylin shriek and drop her panels, clutching at her face. Lana and Ruth only made it halfway in before Vaylin’s hands shot out to push another Force wave.

Well, Ruth didn’t have to get close to be effective.

Scythia and Lana still pressed her. Ruth waited for her chance, and when the lineup was right she shoved Vaylin into the shielded area and punched the shield back up.

“What are you doing?” said Lana.

“Stopping her,” said Ruth, nodding toward Scythia. “It’s you, me, and her. I want you back on my side. I would say I hold Wynston’s life in my hands, but I’m not like her. I will never punish you for trusting me. Are you with me?”

“Lana,” said Scythia, “I need scarcely remind you that if you break our deal…”

Lana took only a moment in heart-stopping thought. She looked coolly at the Mirialan. “I am altering the deal.” She brought her saber up in guard. “Pray I don't alter it any further...but pray
quickly.”

“Release me!” shrieked Vaylin. “I will break every bone in your body and then vacuum them out and feed them to you! I will grant you ten years of torment for every minute you keep me in this cage!”

Not important yet. Ruth had taken the field with many allies before, some more trustworthy than others. Sworn friends, allies of convenience, even, she thought with a hysterical chuckle, even Jedi. This was no different.

Darth Scythia wielded Force lightning like a whip and a torrent. She targeted Ruth’s wounded jaw and Ruth shouted, half blind with pain, as she charged in. Lana flanked with consummate professionalism. Scythia punched the floor and sent them both sprawling in a concussive ring. She raked Ruth’s face with sparking viciousness and stopped only to do something to Lana.

Ruth closed. She stabbed. Scythia wasn’t there for the first one, or the second. But she didn’t dodge Lana as well.

Ruth looked at the red point jutting from Scythia’s back.

“That’s for Odessen,” said Lana. “I would say more,” the Mirialan’s body slid to the floor, “but that seems like a reasonable stopping point.”

“Do we trust the pilot?” said Ruth.

“More important: is this still spaceworthy?”

Ruth pressed the bulkhead control. It sealed despite the dent. “I think so.”

Vaylin stamped her foot. “Are you listening to me? Listen! You’re dead and by the time I’m finished with you you’ll be begging for it! I will cut your legs off at the knee and make you walk on the stubs until you bleed to death!”

“I need to get to Zakuul,” said Ruth.

“I know,” said Lana. “Valkorion is still in your head?”

Ruth’s stomach seized. “The holocron.”

Lana stepped to the end of the hall and picked the device up. “None the worse for wear,” she said. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you much about it.”

Ruth accepted it from her hands. “It’s powerful,” she said. “But I’m no scholar. I can try to activate it.” She poked. She prodded. She probed with the Force. She was rapidly coming to the end of her training. “What’s supposed to be inside?”

“This may not be the place,” said Lana. “If it was the Emperor’s, we bring it to the place the Emperor reigned.”

“I was going there anyway, once I had my answer, whatever that answer was. I have friends waiting.”

“Of course you do.” Lana looked over her shoulder. “The pilot is one of Scythia’s cyborgs. He… lacks the will to do anything creative. We should let him know about the change of plans.”

But Valkorion remained in Ruth’s head, and two victories didn’t mean the war was won. “Lana…
assuming you’ve earned my trust, assuming we can go back or make something better…there’s still a chance I go insane and kill you.”

“So you’re Sith.” Lana smiled her old smile, a little wry, a little knowing. “I’ll cope.”
In Every Incarnation

Chapter Summary

The Alliance assembles on Zakuul and begins the assault on the imperial palace. Valkorion tells Ruth about herself. (Ruth, Calline, Larr Gith, Vette, T7-01, Scourge, Lana, Tebbith, Koth, Wynston, Theron, Valkorion)

Ruth stopped on Zakuul.

Calline, with Larr Gith’s remote help, had secured a warehouse a small distance from the palace. She waved Ruth down, sparing only a short curious look for the cargo bay on the unwieldy vessel. Ruth gave the hoarsely fuming Vaylin one last look, then walked out with her sabers ready.

“Calline,” she said. “Are we secure?”

The bounty hunter secured her blaster and walked in with them, turning her helmeted face toward Lana. “Are we?”

“She’s clean.”

Calline pulled off her helmet and nodded. “Nathema okay?”

“Long story. Do you think more people will show up here?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Theron?”

Calline looked understanding. “He’s okay.”

Vette popped out from behind some crates. Ruth was halfway through an upward slash before she realized it. “Oh,” she said. “Vette, is ‘surprise the Sith’ ever a good idea?”

“How would I know? You never let me try. Hey, I got you something.” She pulled out the aurodium chain with the blue stone pendant. “I was looking for you and this kind of fell into my pocket.”

“Vette! I had forgotten I had this!” Ruth held it up to the light where it sparkled pale blue and dully glistened dark. “It was a gift from my parents when I was young enough to have two parents to pick gifts for me. I… I never felt right wearing it after what happened.” She opted not to elaborate on that statement. Instead she studied the pendant a moment longer and stashed it in her pocket. “Maybe I’m good enough for it now. I… this is your subtle attempt to get me out of my own head, isn’t it.”

“Did it work?”

“Thank you. I’m trying. Were you two really all right while I was out?”
“You’re hard to track,” said Calline, as if that were a compliment.

Vette grinned. “Let me tell you, everybody loses their sense of humor when you’re in mortal danger. I’m not saying you have a cult, but there are signs.”

Larr Gith and T7-01 were the next to arrive. The Jedi raised her arms and spun on her approach, taking in the high ceiling, the vast doors, the heaps of crates. “This is the best my rebels could get for you? Color me…impressed, actually.”

“It’s been quiet,” said Calline, and Ruth suspected that that was the Chiss’s highest praise.

Ruth’s own ship landed outside next. Lord Scourge emerged looking grim.

“You made it,” he said to Ruth. “I was delayed.”

“No,” said Larr Gith.

“Jedi.”

“No,” said Larr Gith.

“He’s the one who got us this far,” said Ruth.

“No,” said Larr Gith.

“The feeling is mutual,” said Lord Scourge. “But if my vision is to come to pass, this must be the day for it.”

“Well…I guess you could see me holding the Emperor’s power in my hands,” said Larr Gith, looking a little mollified.

“Don’t touch me,” said Ruth.

“Oh, gross.” Larr Gith jerked a thumb at Lana. “So is she in now?”

Lana seemed to shrink a little. “I’m here to support Ruth’s bid,” she said crisply. “I don’t ask for your trust but I’d like your tolerance.”

“Ruth, you have this really bizarre history with people who try to kill you.”

“She killed Scythia.”

“Oh, big points there, I admit. She could still be on Team Lana.”

“In this crowd?” said Lana. “Are you insane? I have chosen Ruth’s side.”

Ruth ached to believe it. There was just no time for proofs. “You can guard the entrance while we fight inside. I’ll manage the holocron. Teeseven, can you watch the ship I came in on? If Vaylin escapes, just get out of there and warn us.”

“Vaylin…escapes?” Larr Gith said, too calmly.

“Scythia built a means of trapping her. I want to bring her back to Ephel, to the enclosure there, assuming I no longer need it. I want to try to heal her.”

Larr Gith gaped. “That’s the thinking that cost us Odessen!”
“Yes, but neither Scythia nor the Eternal Fleet can get to us this time.”

Larr Gith’s amber eyes hardened. “She racked up more bad guy points in the past week than most people get all their lives!”

Lana looked appraisingly at Ruth and Ruth braced herself for the withering response. But Lana only said, “A monster of circumstance is not a waste of life.”

“It’s what Senya would have wanted,” said Ruth. “Before I was forced to kill her, lest you forget.”

“Mercy,” said Tebbith from the doorway. “I stand ready, Madam Outlander. Perhaps the cell at home will see use after all.”

“Who else is coming?” said Ruth.

“Me,” said Koth behind him. “Wynston coming in.” He moved aside to let the Chiss in. Wynston looked at Lana to the exclusion of all else. She didn’t break eye contact. They kept surprisingly straight faces, under the circumstances. “Otherwise, there’s…”

“Theron,” said Ruth.

He walked in without looking at anyone. “Okay,” he said. “What’s the plan?”

“Simple enough,” said Ruth, tightening his jacket around her. Did she really have the right to make him perform more emotion than that? “Ships need guarding. That’s – Calline, if you brought someone – and Teeseven.”

“And Koth,” said Tebbith. “My ship can be ready for quick extraction.”

“Fine,” said Ruth. Now she was talking toward Theron. “The palace is guarded by a swarm of Skytrooper droids and a smaller body of highly specialized Knights. There are other security hurdles scattered throughout the entry sequence.”

“Hmm, cracking vaults? I haven’t done that in at least a day and a half,” said Vette.

“My thoughts exactly. Tebbith, if you could protect her? There may be Knights in the way.”

Tebbith bowed. “Everyone else, with me.”

Theron looked skeptical. “Sith who apparently needs no introduction…what do you do?”

“I am Lord Scourge. Relevant to the day’s activities, I kill things.”

“Fine. Ruth, do you trust him?”

She wished he would look at her already. “Enough to fight at his side. We had the same job once. He’s earned watching the Emperor’s destruction.”

Lana stepped up. “Ruth, if this man is the former Emperor’s Wrath–”

“I’m being careful, Lana. I promise.” Ruth looked around at the motley assortment. “Everyone. I can’t tell you how happy I am that you made it here. That…we…made it here. We’ve walked a lot of roads to get here, most of us separately, sometimes by choice and sometimes not. I understand that.” She passed her gaze from face to face, searching for resolve and finding it. Even Theron met her eye, calm, intense, magnetic. “But we’re here to destroy Emperor Valkorion and take the Eternal Empire under sane management. Even if that has to be us. You’re here because you have to be, or you chose to be, or you don’t trust anyone else to do the job – and those reasons are fine, but
for the next three hours I don’t care about them. As long as you stand with me. We are the Alliance. And we know where we’re going.”

Something slammed into the door at the far end of the warehouse. Calline swept up her blaster. Ruth drew her other saber. They spread out as they approached.

The huge golden door shuddered and rose. A trio of Zakuulian Knights walked in.

Ruth’s thrown saber sliced one arm off before the action got started. Larr Gith leaped with the kind of abandon Jedi were supposed to avoid. The Force-blinds shot the second and third Knights down before Larr Gith could push the first body away. The patrol went down before they could scream. Or call anyone.

“That started a timer,” said Lana. “Weapons down until the next patrol we meet. Let’s move out.”

* 

The Imperial Palace of Zakuul took the grand scale of the venerable city and blew it up another order of magnitude. Ruth hadn’t been looking up the last time she’d been here. She hadn’t known there was that much aurodium foil in the world. The Hutts would be jealous, she thought drily.

Droid patrols carpeted the area. Ruth grasped her lightsabers on the first view.

The droids noticed them. They lined up and saluted.

“Uh,” said Ruth.


Ruth let her weapons go. “How many of them?”

“I set it to self-replicate. Anybody with a red light on the corner of its optics.”

“Well then.” Ruth eyed Calline, but Calline in her helmet was totally impassive. “Carry on.”

They sped up as they approached the great gates. The last thing they wanted was to be caught where the enemy could call in air support. Ruth cut down an elite knight while her companions dealt with two more. They ran for the entry chamber. This place was grand but dead apart from the pounding of guards’ feet. A small group of red-eyed Skytroopers started firing on the guards. It helped.

Vette stopped outside. “All right,” said Vette, staring at her holo. “I think I know where to go to deactivate security. Master Tebbith?”

He bowed. “I follow your lead.”

“I knew a Jedi like you once,” she said cheerfully. “A Mon Cal. Well, less of a Jedi and more of a con artist. But he was really sweet, too.” Together they loped around the corner to a secondary door.

Indoors, Ruth dimly remembered the way from the launch pad to the throne room. Then again, she only had to follow the most grandiose statue-lined path available. Calline and Theron flanked her, with Wynston backing them up and Larr Gith and Scourge bringing up a wary rear guard.

Resistance got stiffer as they reached the long narrow path hanging unsupported over a chasm to the throne itself. Ruth hacked as quickly as she could. If this holocron was to be used, it had to be
used here.

The hallway behind them erupted. The Calline-modified Skytroopers were battling a stream of guards from street level. “Ruth,” called Theron. “Do your thing.” He raised his blaster in perfect form.

Ruth grasped the holocron and walked up to the throne.

*

Koth had found an out-of-the-way place to hide a ship for an hour or two. Tebbith had left him there to guard. They might need the extraction.

“Well, there’s the servants’ entrance,” said Vette. “We should be able to find an access vent in there. Right up to the guts. Which, I hope, smell better than guts. You never know in a place like this. Judging by the first access panel…” she looked Tebbith up and down as if measuring his size against that of the vents… “well, stay up here, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Physics being what it is, yes. Don’t worry, most of our problems will be trying to come in this route.” Vette trotted away. Tebbith turned around.

And saw six Zakuulian Knights with weapons up closing in on him.

He took a steadying breath and activated his green saber. He wasn’t much of a fighter but he could block some strokes while he used loose items in the scene to knock people over.

One heavy trash can, one fallen Knight. Like that.

Still, five to one. If he didn’t hold them here, Ruth might never get into the throne room and might never be rid of the Emperor. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

He reached out. He wound himself up in the Force. He grasped, willing all five combatants to slow, to lose themselves in viscous time. He had done it for single enemies before. If willpower and prayer could extend it, willpower and prayer would give him time to deal with them.

One slowed. One stumbled. The other three raised their weapons at normal speed.

That’s when the familiar fighter roared over the nearest ledge. It fired in raucous orange. Tebbith dove for cover as the fighter swept over, firing, and doubled back before landing on what would have been the battlefield.

Koth opened the hatch.

“Koth! I asked you to stay with the ship!”

“And I did. Ship’s right here.”

The relief was thick and warm and wonderful. “Let’s keep this woman’s escape path clear,” said Tebbith.

Koth grinned. “You and me.”
It called to her. She didn’t know who within her was drawn to it, achingly, physically. Maybe both tenants. Ruth stood clear and reached for the holocron in her mind. It quivered.

She heard a cut-off shout behind her. She spun. Larr Gith was locked in combat with two Knights of Zakuul while Scourge swung at a third and Calline hung back and fired at a fourth. Wynston was stabbing a fifth’s saber hand, and he looked frighteningly calm doing it. A sixth Knight of Zakuul was moving on the catwalk. Theron was falling off of it.

She reached forward. “Theron!”

Time slowed. “Not when you are so close,” said the deep voice. “Take the Throne. It stands ready before you. Claim it!”

When Ruth lunged the grey world shifted around her. Ruth found herself alone with Valkorion in a frozen scene. She could see Theron’s weight, and how it wasn’t over solid ground anymore.

Valkorion looked solemn as always, though his eyes glowed red. “I can save him,” he said.

“So you can take over?”

He tilted his head. “Is the prospect so terrible?”


“And you make yourself more my vessel with yours. Do you wish to believe you are more righteous?”

No! It’s not about righteousness! It’s not about your family, though I mean to avenge Arcann and vindicate Senya. This is about you and me.”

“Yes. You. My servant.” Valkorion folded his hands behind his back and watched her, unblinking.

“You can admit to me what you never told your…friends.”

Something chilled her deep inside. She hated to think he could touch that.

“You crave being ruled,” he said. “From the day your childhood’s master called for your death, when you came running to my Servants. On Voss, the last time you ever rose a hand against me… and even then it was at my will.” She remembered. She remembered serving. “In my Voice’s station where the Wrath took her orders. Before my throne, when you begged me to make things simple. Did you think I could not read that in your open heart? In your prison on Zakuul. In your uneven first match with my son. In your desperate stand under city. In the ruins of treachery on Dromund Kaas.” He leaned forward. “In your darkest hours, it was never your friend or child or
lover. It was I you prayed to. And I answered. I granted you certainty, life, peace. Those boons bought your fealty. Now I only require what you have already promised me.”

He hadn’t said a false word yet. Not until the last two. She clung to that. “I promised nothing.”

“Ruth.” He drew the name out, as damning as the litany that preceded it. “In every incarnation you ever met, you have knelt.”
Ruth faces Valkorion. The Alliance faces one another.

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He stood, towering over Ruth, close enough to touch only too terrible to do so. “For peace?” she said, pushing away the voices that reminded her that he spoke truth. “Not me. Peace is a lie.”

“You let me in. You channeled my power more than willingly.”

It was true, so she had to fight it. She had only the tools of her own mind. She always had. “There is only passion. Through passion I gain strength.”

“You begged me to make you my instrument. You’ve submitted before. Submit now. I promise you ecstasy in death.”

“Through strength I gain power.” He frowned and reached out, laying a hand on her shoulder. He pressed. It was the effort of a force of nature, bleak and uncompromising and so, so heavy.

But she was past all that.

She straightened her spine. He could press for a thousand years and never break through what she had become. “Through power I gain victory,” she said, loud and clear. She shook off his hand and started circling him, intensely aware now of the Force around her, her will drawing it into durasteel armor. This was what she was. She would not let him turn her past choices against her. Desperation was not her way of life. It was a phase, and one that was over. “Through victory my chains are broken.” She reached for her saber and drew it, finding it washed-out and wavering here, but a blade from her will nevertheless. “The Force will free me.” She struck for his neck, clean.

It passed through.

Valkorion stood attentively, half smiling. “And?”

Her saber hummed as if not realizing it had failed.

Ruth felt a hand on her shoulder. She spun to find Senya, armored, looking unhappy.

It struck her to the heart. “Senya,” Ruth said. “I am sorry for what I’ve…”

The dark-haired woman shook her head. “I know what you did, and why. I thank you for giving my
daughter a chance. Whether she will take it, I can no longer say. But healing sometimes comes from strange and stubborn places.” She stepped up beside Ruth and drew her lightsaber. “Valkorion. You tortured our children to madness and turned your back on them for being mad.”

“For being weak, Senya. You never understood the distinction.”

Ruth half turned to see Arcann stalking up. She tensed, but the maimed prince simply came up to her side. The four of them stood, the only life in a still grey world.

One more behind her, she recalled, but so long as this world was whispering in grey he wasn’t moving.

Vaylin had been spared this little convocation, thought Ruth. Somehow she doubted the princess would thank her. “A convention of mewling fools,” said Arcann, looking down at Ruth. “What, has none of you managed to kill each other yet? Mother excepted.”

“Son. Kill the Outlander,” said Valkorion. “She killed you.”

“The Outlander didn’t kill me,” said Arcann. He took out his lightsaber, activated its baleful yellow, flourished, seemed to think about it for a second. “You did.”

Ruth remembered what Valkorion’s voice had driven from her mind. She offered the holocron’s energies, once again trying to will the device to life. Here they bubbled bright, finally free, as though happy to play at the foot of the waiting throne. Then they lashed around the old man in a thickening mesh. Arcann and Senya closed in, stabbing in an elegant form that spoke of the same school of teaching, years ago. Valkorion raised his hands only to see them bound by the cloudy energy. Ruth saw the moment when the illusory sabers became real, or else he became illusory. Valkorion shuddered and opened his mouth, not yet hurt enough to make a sound. Senya and Arcann stabbed his shoulder and side, harsh and precise.

Ruth closed the distance, still allowing the bright energy to fall out of the holocron in her left hand.

Valkorion shuddered to his knees and glared up at those who had once been his victims. “Before I graced you with my presence, you were nothing but motes of filth drowning in the chaos of the void. And you, a lone slave, bloated with borrowed power. I forged you into a being worthy of the Eternal Throne. Without me, you are nothing.”

Nothing he would understand, maybe. “Without you I am this galaxy’s best chance.” Ruth stepped in and slashed.

He laughed in that last second. But he died.

The holocron shivered and went inert. Its glowing energy began to disperse.

“I would follow in his footsteps,” said Arcann. “But I think I am not long for even this world.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“If he didn’t take you, he would have taken me. If I had proved worthy. There is no debt between us, Outlander.” He faded.

“Ruth,” said Senya.

“I wish I could do more,” said Ruth.
“You have an Empire to manage. That’s enough for one person.”

“I…” what could possibly be adequate? …“always thought of you as a friend.”

“And I you. I’m sorry I never got to meet your son. I can’t imagine him in better hands. Goodbye, Ruth.” She looked up and around. “Back to the world, one more time.”

The world brightened.

She whirled. Theron was no longer at the edge of the walkway. He was no longer on the walkway. He was no longer suspended beneath it, waiting for her crystallized time. Time had passed. Time had passed.

The memory of Valkorion’s laughter echoed in Ruth’s ears. She sprinted to where she had last seen him, deaf to whatever was going on to either side. “Theron!” she shrieked. “Theron, where are you? Theron!”

Ruth’s voice echoed in the clean cold depths of the throne room. The round abyss went down and down and down. The others around her were silent. The world was silent.

Larr Gith cleared her throat. “We’re also—”

“Shut up,” said Ruth, thinking of the last conversation and how much hadn’t been resolved. Shouldn’t she have told him more before she let him charge into mortal danger? “Just shut up.”

Something sounded from the edge of the cylindrical basin. A flare, bursting into red light in the air between them. She looked down. Two people were standing there. Calline was one. The other was Theron.

Wynston, coming up beside Ruth, smiled crookedly. “My sister,” he said. “I told her jetpacks are overpriced and unreliable.”

Larr Gith peered over Ruth’s shoulder. “What happened? You’re not still evil, are you?”

“I’m alone in here.” Ruth stood and pushed a tear aside. “I am all alone and it’s wonderful.”

Lana limped in, looking the worse for wear, with her lightsaber sheathed and her hands up. “Success?” she asked Ruth.

“He’s gone,” said Ruth. “Zakuul is ours.”

Lana looked at Wynston. Wynston looked at Lana. “I stopped,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Come home,” he said.

“If you’ll have me.”

“We’ll have you.” He didn’t look at Ruth or anybody for confirmation. “Come home.”

Larr Gith strolled up to the throne. “Hey, Scourge,” she sang. “Lookit this.” She sat, curling her hands around the armrests. “One ‘holding the Emperor’s power in my hands,’ delivered.”
Lord Scourge, swathed in his black cloak, looked up from his hands and knees. “Jedi…”

“Hey,” she said, standing. She frowned and flitted back to him. “You okay?” Scourge just stared at her. She reached out and touched his smooth scalp. “Red? You…you’re not even wounded.”

“His power gave me this shade of life.” He looked perfectly calm. “You're an idiot, but you are a warrior. It has been my...” he reached out and grasped her jaw in one large hand, then tilted her face to one side. “Your hair is gold,” he said wonderingly. His eyes closed just before his hand and whole body fell flat.

“Sh,” said Larr Gith. “Rest now.” She looked wide-eyed at Ruth. “He was always kind of goal-oriented,” she said weakly.

“He died in the fight he wanted,” said Ruth.

Tebbith, Koth, and Vette showed up next. “So you didn’t die at least five ways because of my hard work,” said Vette. And, graciously, “Teb and Koth helped.”

“Madam Outlander?” said Tebbith.

“I’m all right,” said Ruth. “Good to see you. Vette, remind me to lose at cards to you for the next month at least.” She turned to Koth, then, her cheer fading. “I killed your Emperor.”

Koth eyed her warily. “I hear he had it coming,” he admitted.

“You protected my people. This is your country, not mine, and I need your voice honestly.” She stuck out her hand. “Friends?”

“After everything?” He cocked one eyebrow and shook her hand. “I’ve had worse ideas.”

Tebbith relaxed visibly. Everyone pretended not to notice.

Finally Calline and Theron entered. Calline jerked a thumb at her backpack. “Fuel,” she said. “Had to land.”

“You had enough when it counted,” said Ruth. “Theron…Theron.” She walked past the others, her heart pounding. They stopped toe to toe. She looked up at him. She was done running, but that only fixed things halfway.

She felt like she'd seen it on a holovid once. “Am I still your girl?”

He grinned. His eyes held worlds. “We'll work it out,” he said softly, and hugged her, hard. The scent that had started fading from his jacket was here, subtle, home. “Aw,” he whispered, leaning into her tight embrace, warm and solid in her arms, nuzzling her hair. “We'll talk it through.”

She smiled a little mistily and gave herself another few seconds in his arms before she looked around. Lana met her eye. “There is one complication,” said Lana. “Someone must sit the Eternal Throne to control the Eternal Fleet. There may be other functions as well.”

“We can slice that to go to a normal console, right?” Ruth pointed at the wall near the door. “Is that something we can do?”

Lana's mouth twitched up. “Probably.” She and Wynston strode in sync to the throne's side and started pressing buttons, and if their hands touched from time to time crossing one another, well, no one told them it was wrong.
Calline leaned cross-ankled in the doorway. She looked at Vette as the Twi'lek came up.

“High five?” suggested Vette, raising a hand.

Calline took off her helmet and looked at her.

“Okay, or...”

Calline leaned in and slapped her palm. “Did good,” she said.

Tebbith looked around anxiously. “Is everyone all right?”

“You're bleeding,” said Koth, pointing at his arm.

“Is everyone all right.”

Larr Gith rolled her eyes. “Physically, yes. We were glorious. You should've been there. Also, you're still bleeding.”

“Oh,” said Tebbith. “Just a moment.” He knelt and started a gentle white glow. Everyone felt the Light Side wash, soothing, lifting away some of the strain of the battle. When he opened his eyes again he looked beatific.

“Very stylish,” Koth said quietly. “You never told me you could do that.”

“I thought you wanted to be useful. It’s just a...skill.”

“Nice one to have around. You okay?”

Tebbith tried a smile. “Yes.”

Larr Gith made wide eyes and a moue. “Did someone finally talk you into—”

“It’s just,” interrupted Tebbith. “With everything we've been through and seen, I've really started to believe...” Tebbith sighed. “What do I say?”

She beamed. “Please tell me you're asking my advice on how to entice men.”

Koth snorted. Tebbith looked terrified. “I wouldn't say entice...”

“Say it, or I won't give you a thing.”

“Larr Gith, you are sometimes a very difficult woman.”

Larr Gith squealed beautifully. “Was that an insult? We'll make a real boy out of you yet.”

Ruth sat beside Theron on one of the steps across the bridge from the Throne. She looked at her friends.

“Everyone's okay,” she said. “Are you okay?”

He smiled, looking out ahead of them both. “I'm just thinking about where we started. You were afraid to sleep those first few days. They'd done so much to you, and you survived it. All the way up to this.” He turned his head a little toward her. “You realize we get to start over now that it's just you in there?”

He sounded a little fatigued. “Is starting over bad?”
His grin was balm on what wounds she had left. “It just means we're going to have a lot of firsts to re-enjoy.”

“Mm. Okay. Let’s never do these last few weeks again.”

“That’s a promise. What about you? Ready to take the Eternal Throne?”

“Absolutely not. I'm having it blown up as soon as the electronic commands get rerouted.”

He laughed and patted her leg. “Yes. You're still my girl.”

She basked for another few breaths, then stood. “Everyone’s okay?” Nobody argued. “I'd better make an announcement. We did just have a coup d'état. Calline, did you spot any camera drones?” Calline nodded and stepped out. Ruth looked around. “Everyone...I feel like I'm responsible for the last two and a half years. But I want to thank you for being there with me and for me. I'm free now. Stars, for the first time in seven and a half years. That means things are going to change, for the better, I hope. Whatever the new government is going to be, you're welcome to a place in it.”

“It has been my honor,” said Tebbith. “I have matters to attend to.” Ruth was pretty sure that nobody missed his sidelong look at Koth. “If I am free to return, I will.”

“I am not signing up for staff meetings,” said Vette. “But you can bet I'm coming back for my ship. And some pazaak, since you did promise to lose.”

Koth caught Ruth's eye, smirked, and nodded. “I belong with the Alliance. But I’ll always be representing Zakuul.”

Wynston’s smile gleamed. “Just try chasing me off.”

Lana looked over, unsmiling. “Ruth, I'll understand...”

And force Wynston into half-exile if he wanted to see her again? “Keep me honest, Lana. Look for things I don't see. Challenge me when the others won't. If you’re really willing to come into my command structure again, with just me, Ruth Niral, no tricks, no arcane mandate, and no intention of stepping down...there is a place for you. Among friends.”

Whatever response Lana might have given was talked over. “Can I rule Zakuul with an iron fist?” said Larr Gith. “No? Just checking.”

Calline was trotting back with an oversized drone barely contained under her arm. She hit a few buttons and let it rise.

Ruth deactivated her sabers and kept her chin up high. Time to give her first speech in the new scheme. Time to tell the whole galaxy that she had earned the Commander of the Dawning Alliance.

Calline, Larr Gith, Lana, Wynston, Koth, Vette, Tebbith, Theron, her touchstones and her friends, all watched and waited. She was all by herself both more and less than ever before, and both extremes were wonderful.

Time to improve things.

--fin--
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