Riptide
by AkiRah

Summary

What might have happened if Jhonnen from Hyperdrive Lullabies had been Force Sensitive. Imagine if his father had found them and forced him to be Sith. This is the story of Jhonnen: unwillingly sith and unhappily good at it. Bouyed by the smile of his only real friend.

Notes

For better understanding of Jhonnen's character, considered this a shameless self-promotion of Hyperdrive Lullabies, a different fic I wrote.
Jhonnen was dozing on the couch when it happened. He felt it first: an impending darkness that forced him off the couch and to his feet a few seconds before the front door exploded inwards.

“Jhonny!” his mother screamed his name and Jhonnen threw his will forward like he was knocking over cans in the back alley with Kira and bowled the invading soldiers over before turning and darting to the back bedroom where his mother was calling for him.

Isixia jerked the door closed and took a half second to smooth her hands over her son’s face like he was younger than his thirteen years. “The window.” She pushed him towards it.

“What?”

“Go out the fucking window,” Isixia hissed, shoving him forwards. Jhonnen would remember the scent of death sticks and flower perfume for the rest of his life as they reached the glass and she pushed him through it.

He hit the ground and groaned for a moment before rolling to his feet. He had to run but he wasn’t sure where. He wasn’t even sure who was breaking into the house. Cartel soldiers? Maybe? All he knew was that his mother was terrified, and that she’d shoved him out a window to protect him.

He couldn’t just leave her though. He was gifted in the Force. If he could protect her he had to try.

He heard a scream.

“Mom!” He shouted back. He staggered to his feet and came around the front of the building.

They weren’t cartel soldiers.

Jhonnen took in their jet black uniforms with defiance in his pale grey eyes.

“Halt,” one of them pointed their blaster rifle at him. “You’re coming with us.”

<< Suck hutt nuts in hell, >> Jhonnen spat back in Huttese. He threw them out of the way with the Force, grunting with effort as he did. “Mom!”

“Jhonny!” Isixia’s scream was heightened on the end with sounded like pain. “RUN!”

He froze, terror making his knees knock. “I’m… I’m not afraid.” He lied. “Let go of my mother!”

Something cold dripped into his stomach as the apartment door opened and a tall, familiar man levitated Isixia down the steps by her neck. “Behave,” said the pureblood Sith lord holding her captive. His tone was calm and icy. “Or I will snap her neck.”

Jhonnen swallowed. It had been nine years but he remembered the man’s face. The proud, haughty bearing. The silver eyes that had been passed to Jhonnen.

“Run,” Isixia croaked again.

He knew the story, how she had fled to protect him. How his gift in the Force was why they lived in a Nar Shaddaan slum and not the lap of luxury. How she had wanted to protect him from everything that being Sith entailed.
Jhonnen was very, very still.

Isixia was dropped in the street.

Jhonnen felt Kira’s thoughts snake into his, she must have been nearby, he tried to warn her to go away but the thoughts remained. Like their grubby hands gripping each others.

*I’m here,* Kira promised through the Force.

Jhonnen clung to her as Isixia rose up on her knees. “He’s a *child* Fen—Vitreous,” she corrected to the sith name. “He’s *our* child. You can’t just—”

Vitreous silenced her with an armored backhand that threatened to split her jaw. “He’s *my* son, Isixia. Did you think I’d let you steal my legacy and squander it? Living here like a common Nar Shaddaan *whore*?”

Jhonnen clung more tightly to Kira. He reached out to his mother, knowing that without Force Sensitivity she couldn’t reach back.

“The boy needs a lesson about how life will work from now on. You robbed him of an early start, but perhaps the first lesson needs to be the most poignant.” Vitreous drew and ignited his lightsaber in one fluid motion. Jhonnen screamed as he felt the death snick through his thoughts and the fire that had been Isixia Lief was extinguished.

“I’ll kill you,” he screamed. “I’ll fucking—”

Strong hands gripped his jaw and forced his head up. “Someday, perhaps. Now you will come quietly, Jhonnen, or I will find the friend I sense and I will teach you two lessons about weakness in one day?”

Kira squeezed Jhonnen's thoughts, trying to shield his mind with her whole being as he was lead away.

Their connection failed as Jhonnen boarded the ship to Dromund Kaas, the distance prying them apart and leaving him with only his mother’s death to occupy his mind.
Chapter Summary

Jhonnen is pulled from the Dromund Kaas Academy so he can compete for the attention of Darth Baras. More over, he meets an unbroken slave and delights in her spirit.

Jhonnen was not particularly thrilled to be being moved to the Korriban Academy. It was the more prestigious, certainly, and this pleased Vitreous.

But as far as Jhonnen was concerned, Vitreous’s pleasure was just one more thing to hate. He exhaled as the shuttle touched down on the red sands. It didn’t matter anymore anyway. It had been decided and it was all he could do to survive it.

At least none of his ‘betters’ expected him to smile for them. He listened, irritated, as Tremel outlined the reasons for his transfer. They translated simply to: you’re a big strong pureblood sith and Vemrin has slave blood. And Jhonnen thought this was stupid. Particularly because he wasn’t a big strong pureblood sith. A steady diet of sulking and attempted murder had kept him lean and the only physical trait he really shared with his mother was that he was on the shorter side of average.

He was little.

And he liked it.

At least Tremel didn’t need to talk to him for a long time. He was directed to the tomb of Ajunta Pall, wherein waited a warblade for him. Jhonnen carved his way through the k’lor slugs and what of the tomb raiders he could not avoid. The dance of combat was like an old friend. He had spent seven years loving nothing so much as the moments when he was left alone to hone his skills on the battle droids.

Some days he thought about his dreams of flying. When he was feeling really masochistic he would imagine Kira in the flight simulator beside him. His companion and co-pilot as they took to the hyperlanes as daring pirates or wealthy free traders.

Fortunately, Vitreous’s ‘lessons’ had mostly beaten the daydreams out of him.

He recovered the warblade and headed to the Academy itself, staring up at the jet black stone and finding that it wasn’t notably more impressive than the slick wet surface of the Dromund Kaas Academy. It was just more dangerous.

Which was fine. Anything, anyone, trying to kill him would find that Jhonnen wasn’t going to die before he’d buried a blade in Vitreous’s withered black heart. He would live long enough to avenge his mother, and perhaps not much longer.

If he had to impress Baras to reach his goal, than Baras would be impressed.

If he had to kill Vemrin to reach his goal, than Vemrin was going to die.
Speaking of.

Jhonnen rounded the corner to Tremel’s office and was stopped by a pair of human acolytes, one of whom was clearly the brain and the other might have been the brawn if it weren’t for the dangerous waves rolling off the brain.

“Vemrin?” Jhonnen asked, resting his weight comfortably. There were rules in the Academy, Vemrin couldn’t just ice him while there was a chance that someone would notice. And if Vemrin were dumb enough to try, he’d find out just how high Jhonnen could get his knee with one jump.

“So you’re Overseer Tremel’s secret weapon, huh?” Vemrin (probably) looked him up and down. “A little scrawny aren’t you? Not that it matters, afraid the old man waited too long to make his move though.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow. It wasn’t the first time he’d been called scrawny, it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“I’m Vemrin,” the twat finally got around to confirming. “And unlike you, I’ve fought and bled for everything I have. I demand respect.”

Jhonnen’s posture slouched even further. Vemrin, naturally, didn’t know shit for dick what Jhonnen had been through and at the end of the day it didn’t matter. “If you’re determined for us to be enemies, I’ll oblige you. But it might go easier for everyone if we’re not wagging our dicks around during trials designed to get us all killed.”

“Get you killed, more like.” Vemrin said.

Jhonnen sighed. He hadn’t expected anyone in the Academy to be friendly but this was ridiculous.

“If Overseer Tremel had made his move a year ago, when I first arrived, you might’ve had a chance. But now—too little, too late.”

“This is ridiculous,” said the big one who was not the brawn or the brain of Vemrin’s operation. “Let’s just kill him and hide the body.”

“That would be a very neat trick,” Jhonnen said sarcastically.

The big one started to move but Vermin held out an arm to keep him back. “We’re not on Balmorra anymore, Dolgis. There are rules. Traditions. We’ll leave the shortcuts to Overseer Tremel and his last pathetic hope here.”

“I’ve figured it out,” Jhonnen dropped his right fist into his left palm like he’d made a discovery. “Dolgis is the sparkling personality because you’re about as pleasant to talk to as backwash.”

“You’re not funny,” Vemrin lied (Jhonnen was hilarious, or at least he had been a long time ago). “Just pathetic. And you’ve been warned. Coming Dolgis?”

“Be right there, Vemrin.” Dolgis waited until Vemrin had turned the corner before turning his attention back to Jhonnen.

Jhonnen sighed. “Look, can we not and say we did with the vague threats? I’m supposed to be meeting with an Overseer and you’ve got a dick to suck.” He gave Dolgis the closet he could manage to a cheery smile and pushed past towards Tremel’s office.

If Dolgis attacked him, he could kill him in self-defense and not have to worry as much about
looking over his back.

He was not so lucky.

“One more chirp from you, little bird, and you’ll regret it.”

Jhonnen turned his head as the pretty twi’lek girl in the farthest left cage… chirped. She chirped three times and then the jailer activated her shock collar and she bent back convulsing.

“Ow! Fuck!” she protested when the shocks had stopped. She shook her head and stuck her tongue out at the jailer (a bold move if she didn’t want to risk losing it) “Jerk! If you don’t like that, just say so. I can do other animals, too. Dire-cat, frog-dog, kowakian monkey-lizard, you name it.”

Jhonnen cracked a very small smile against his will and banished it quickly. The jailer’s thumb moved towards the button again and Jhonnen cleared his throat loudly to interrupt the motion.

The jailer, human and marred with darkside corruption spun to glare at the intrusion, looking above Jhonnen’s head and then looked him in the eye. “You the acolyte Tremel sent for the test, right? Hrmph.” He scowled. “He thinks highly of you.”

“It’s a burden.” Jhonnen shrugged. “What am I dealing with?”

Jhonnen got through the trials as quickly and as leniently as he could. He had no love for the Empire and less than no faith in their judicial system if prisoners could be judged on a whim by twenty-year olds whose only real skill was swinging a sword with some finesse. Yes, yes, there was supposed to be more to being Sith. Vitreous had tried to drill that into his head. Each sith was a politician, thinking constantly of their own advancement.

One of the things Jhonnen had kept from Nar Shaddaa was disdain for politicians.

When he’d finished judging the last one, Jhonnen looked back to the twi’lek girl in the first cage. He gave her a small smile, which she responded to with an even deeper frown. Her lekku twitched in a way that Jhonnen’s mother had told him meant ‘get the manager’ and he figured from context meant ‘I am uncomfortably helpless’.

That was fair, all things considered. If he’d been stuck in a cage with a shock collar on, he’d probably not be in the mood to be smiled at by strangers either.

He dropped his eyes respectfully away from her and headed back to Tremel’s office to get told that he was weak and foolish for showing mercy. He’d heard it a dozen times from Vitreous. That which was not useful was discarded. Weaknesses were gouged out. Only the strong would survive, Jhonnen should keep only that which made him strong.

And Jhonnen largely had no choice but to obey. Any weakness within him would be seized upon and twisted to hurt him.

But he had his memories. No one could touch his memories because he’d built up his mental defenses specifically to keep prying fingers out. In his memories there was sweetness and softness in a place that Vitreous could not threaten.

Tremel was not pleased with Jhonnen’s decisions, but Jhonnen defended them anyway and advanced to the next trial, Tremel being somewhat grudging about it but unwilling to sacrifice his plan.
His plan was a crock of banthashit but it meant Jhonnen advanced so he wasn’t going to point it out.

He left Tremel’s office and headed out to the tomb of Marka Ragnos to meditate and summon a monster that would try to eat him. His thoughts in the taxi traveled back to the twi’lek slave in the jail cell and her unbroken spirit. He hadn’t heard someone mouth off like that in years. All of his father’s slaves had their spirits well broken. All the slaves at the Dromund Kaas Academy had been petrified.

He’d heard a joke that he hadn’t made for the first time in what felt like an age. And while he’d probably never speak to her again, he was grateful for it.

He landed in the wilds as it neared sundown and shivered as the cold wind blew over him. Survival was part of the trial. Jhonnen blew on his fingertips to warm them and headed for the tombs where he’d have shelter from the elements, if not from the beasts.

He found the tomb of Marka Ragnos because Vitreous had been insistent on teaching him at least some of the dead Sith language. So he didn’t insult his bloodline or some shit.

At least it had a use.

Jhonnen found the shrine and meditated. He killed the beast and it was a harder fight than he would like to admit. He found the top of a tall pedestal and meditated in lieu of sleep. He wondered if the spirited twi’lek girl was going to be alright or if the jailer had killed her already for being a nuisance.

He headed back to the Academy in the morning.

He was stopped in an empty corridor by Dolgis. Jhonnen let his shoulders drop with disappointment, subtly dropping his weight to be ready to move in any direction.

“Well,” Dolgis said, because he clearly fancied himself some sort of clever villain. “Look who’s here. Remember me?”

“Does this have a point, Dolgis?” Jhonnen asked.

The hallway was abandoned. This probably had a point in a very literal sense.

“Vemrin thought I should follow up on our earlier chat.” Dolgis gestured around them. “Notice anything interesting? No witnesses. No witnesses means no rules.”

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes.

“No more shortcuts,” Dolgis continued. “No more special—OW FUCK!” Dolgis was cut off by Jhonnen’s knee coming into contact with his nose, crushing the cartilage. Jhonnen dropped to the ground and kneed Dolgis in the dick. Using the Force he threw the other man into a wall.

“Do they teach people not to monologue here?” he asked, one hand on a warblade.

“Hold ub,” Dolgis held both hands up, blood streaming down from his broken nose. “Hold ub. Look I wab wrong. What dey’re daying about joo… totally true. Doh… dtrong. I donb wanna die!”

The broken nose robbed him of any gravitas, which Jhonnen felt was fair.
“Fuck with me again and I will fucking kill you.” Jhonnen said flatly.

“Joo wonb dee me again. I promise.”

“Good.”

Darth Baras’s mask made it difficult to judge his expression. Fortunately, he was all too ready to lay into Jhonnen about the shortcuts Tremel had taken. It was a straightforward sort of thing, he would use Jhonnen to punish Tremel somehow (maybe he’d kill him, as Vitreous has killed Isixia) maybe he’d do something else. If this didn’t end with Jhonnen dead, it would end with him in a position where he owed Baras.

Silently, Jhonnen wondered if he could take Baras in a fight.

Probably not. Best to play this smart if he wanted to live long enough for a shot at Vitreous.

He bore Baras’s insults, knowing on one level that they mattered more than the insults Vitreous had heaped upon him and yet shrugging them off the same way. He kept his eyes on Baras’s chin.

“I didn’t mean to offend,” he said peaceably, wondering how much it would buy him. Baras probably had his mind made up about what he was going to do with Jhonnen. Jhonnen was just waiting around to see if he was going to die or not.

“I am your master now,” Baras said firmly. “Tremel was becoming lax before you ever arrived. His unwillingness to adapt to the evolving Sith paradigm has become a liability.”

Jhonnen nodded automatically.

“These are the actions of a traitor,” Baras continued. “Traitors are executed. I grant you immunity from punishment. Kill Tremel and bring back his hand as proof.”

“Yes, my lord.” Jhonnen inclined his head politely.

He didn’t want to kill Tremel, but he would. Tremel wasn’t an innocent. Tremel was every inch as bad as every other Sith.

He didn’t want to kill Tremel because he didn’t want to kill anyone but Vitreous.

But he wasn’t going to feel bad about killing Tremel.

He headed back down to Tremel’s office and gave a forced and almost apologetic to the old man.

“I didn’t expect to see you again so soon,” Tremel said. “Has Baras sent you back to me?”

“Not exactly.” Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m supposed to kill you.”

“Then I have been outplayed.” Tremel sounded more tired than anything else. “Baras has the authority, but I did not think he would do something this overt. Either I die or he forces me to kill you and to destroy my own plan. A master stroke.”

“Actually it seems pretty obvious,” Jhonnen shrugged. “Two birds, one very large stone.”

“Know that it gives me no pleasure to kill you.”

“Noted.” Jhonnen drew his warblades and squared up. When Tremel lunged at him, Jhonnen slid to
the side, feeling the heat of one lightsaber as it passed dangerously close to his cheek.

He kicked out and caught Tremel in the knee, blocking the Overseer’s blow with both warblades. Pulling the force inside him, Jhonnen forced it from his lungs in a deafening scream that physically knocked the Overseer’s left lightsaber off balance and gave Jhonnen the in he needed to carve the old man from shoulder to waist.

Jhonnen huffed for air and then cut off Tremel’s right arm, leaving the grisly scene behind him and heading back upstairs, trying not to hear the gasps and murmurs as he went.

The trials Baras set were much like the trials Tremel had set. A lot of tombs, a lot of death, a little bit of ancient riddles. Vemrin was a snoot about it, but Jhonnen got the impression that Vemrin was a snoot about lots of things.

One by one, the other acolytes failed and died, until they reached their last trial and it was only Vemrin and Jhonnen left.

As pleased as Jhonnen was to almost be off of Korriban as an apprentice, he couldn’t shake the apprehension. Dolgis maybe have been a pushover, and Jhonnen might have defeated Tremel, but everything he heard said Vemrin was his equal in combat. He didn’t want to face his equal in combat. Facing his equal meant that too much was left up to tactics and luck and Jhonnen couldn’t afford to die yet. Not until he’d paid Vitreous back for every insult and Isixia’s death.

However, it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. Jhonnen steeled himself for what was to come and made his way to Baras’s private audience chambers when he was summoned. He smiled at Vemrin just to irritate the other man and then dropped the smile to look, quite seriously at Baras.

Baras noticed, because of course he did. “The tension is thick between you two. A great source of emotion to feed on. I wonder what will happen when it boils over.”

Immediately, Jhonnen wondered what Baras was on about because Vemrin mostly just… irritated him. However, a second of introspection (all he had time for) told him that he hated Vemrin for a number or reasons it just paled in comparison to the hate that powered his lungs and his every action.

“You both stand on the precipice of becoming Sith,” Baras said. “But only one of you will have the opportunity to claim a special lightsaber and serve as my apprentice.” Baras’s mask turned towards Vemrin. “I thought it would be you, Vemrin, but I’ve changed my mind.” His mask swung over to Jhonnen instead.

“What?” Vemrin demanded. “I’ve done everything you’ve asked. Better than any of the others! The honor should be mine.”

“Unfortunate,” Jhonnen said dryly, standing up under the weight of Baras’s attention. He didn’t trust this, but that was probably wise. There were undercurrents here that he wasn’t smart enough to grasp but at least he was aware of them. That might save him when his sword arm failed.

“Today, Vemrin is every bit your equal, but the Force is stronger with you, acolyte, and there is a power sleeping within you. It was a simple decision.”

Jhonnen definitely didn’t trust the compliments.

But he would take them graciously and wait for the other shoe to drop. Maybe Baras was right and there was just more power in Jhonnen. Jhonnen didn’t feel like there was great power sleeping
within him. He didn’t feel bursting with potential. He felt… angry and wounded. He was good in a
fight. He was good behind the helm of a ship.

He didn’t want to be Sith but he would do it because the path to power was the path to finally
depriving Vitreous of precious oxygen.

Vemrin was sent away and Jhonnen returned his attention to Darth Baras.

“Now,” Baras rubbed his hands together as he spoke. “I hope you fathom how fortunate you are to
be singled out. If you become my apprentice, the galaxy will bend before you.”

Jhonnen bit back his bile and bowed his head. “Yes, my lord.”

“The lightsaber you will seek is old and powerful. It is housed in a forbidden cavern in the tomb of
Naga Sadow where few Sith have ever set foot,” Baras explained. “Almost no one knows how to
find the secret entrance. But there is a Twi’lek in the holding pens who was caught breaking in
there.”

The spirited woman in the slave pens! She had been breaking into the Sith tombs? Without benefit
of a warblade? She had guts, Jhonnen would give her that. More even than it took to talk back to
the jailer holding the control rod to her slave collar.

“I hear she is quite willful,” Baras said.

Jhonnen considered his gift for understatement.

“Take her and make her show you the entrance to the forbidden cave.”

“Yes, master,” Jhonnen said, hoping he could just talk her into it, rather than having to rely on
torture. His mother had abhorred torture eventually, coming to work with former slaves in Panwa
Muni had opened her eyes. And in turn, she’d raised her son with higher standards.

Baras told him that other acolytes would try and murder him in the tombs and Jhonnen nodded
obediently, his brain working out ways to talk a spirited twi’lek into just help so he didn’t have to
shock her. When he was dismissed he headed down the stairs to the slave pens and frowned as he
caught jailer Knash having a good time with the control rod.

The slave didn’t cry out but her jaw was tense, teeth clenched together to keep the screams inside as
she arched back, tears slipping from her eyes. “F-f-fuck,” she breathed. “Give it a rest, will you?”

“I’m getting my fill of fun while I still can, slave,” the jailer mocked.

Jhonnen cleared his throat and folded his arms across his chest in a vaguely threatening manner.

“Ah, as if on cue,” Jailer Knash turned to face him. “Look who’s back. Word is you might become
Lord Baras’s apprentice.” He snorted a little. “Nice work, if you can get it.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen said slowly. His eyes flicked over to where the twi’lek’s lekku twitched
get me
out of here. He turned his attention back to the jailer.

“So, I hear you’ll be relieving me of this Twi’lek. She’s a pain in the neck.”

“Ha!” the twi’lek snorted. “Who’s a pain in the neck? I’m the one wearing the shock collar.”

The jailer shocked her again. “Consider that a going away present, Twi’lek. Seems you might be
useful for something after all. This bruiser is taking you into the tomb where we caught her.”
The twi’lek smiled despite her situation, a wry little twist of her mouth. “None of you can figure out how to activate the tomb statues to open the forbidden cavern, huh?”

Jhonnen nodded. “Yep.”

“You got some kind of business in that secret Sith chamber, do you?”

Knash moved his thumb to shock her again and Jhonnen stopped him. “Yeah,” he said with another nod. “I have to retrieve an ancient lightsaber as my final trial.”

“Don’t bother being pleasant,” advised Knash. “Here, kid, take this shock control rod. I’ll set it to a high level. Use it enough, she’ll show you the back door to her mother’s house.”

Jhonnen took the rod, careful to mask his disgust and looked up at the twi’lek.

She sighed as if put upon. “I suppose I can play tomb tour guide. A lot of work went into cracking that nut, but I did it once. I can do it again.”

Knash unlocked the cell and she stepped out, an inch or two taller than Jhonnen with her expression sharp and her lekku giving away her discomfort.

“So we’re clear,” she said with another wry smile. “I’m officially on strike when it comes to domestic duties.”

Jhonnen snorted a small laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind, shall we?”

She studied his face with the closest thing to a serious expression he’d seen her wear despite the electrocution. “Maybe things are looking up for me,” she said softly. And then she shrugged and in her usual voice added. “As if they could get worse. Lead the way. I’ll show you the unlocking points throughout the tomb and then open the secret door for you.”

“I appreciate it.” Jhonnen lead her out of the jail cells, tucking the control rod carefully into his pocket. When they reached an apparently abandoned strip of hallway he cleared his throat. “What should I call you?”

“Twi’lek isn’t enough for you?”

“It seems… rude.”

There was a pause, through which Jhonnen kept moving. “Vette.” She said. “My name is Vette.”

Jhonnen wasn’t sure if she’d made it up on the spot or if it had just taken her a minute to decide to trust him with a name. It didn’t really matter.

“I’m Jhonnen.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she lied.

But it was a kind lie and in a way he appreciated it.

Outside Vette shivered in the wind. Jhonnen wished he had a coat to offer her, but it would have made him appear weak and, moreover, he didn’t have one. Acolytes were expected to rely on the Force for such things.

It wasn’t going to kill Vette, and she never complained, but Jhonnen read discomfort in the movements of her lekku.
At least he thought he did. He was seven years out of practice and he’d picked up the secretive sub-
set of rylorian in a strip club. His mother and an older twi’lek named Ness had taught him to read
the little signals so he could better navigate the underworld he was being brought up in.

Isixia was dead now, Ness was seven years behind him. It wasn’t worth thinking about.

They reached the tomb and Jhonnen tried to remember which one was Naga Sadow and came up
blank. One of Tulak Hord’s enemies but that was kind of a gimme. All the ancient sith were
enemies. It was one of the depressing truths about being Sith.

In the tomb itself, Vette presented a unique challenge. He now had to protect someone. Vette had a
good throwing arm as chucked rocks at the murderous other acolytes, but Jhonnen still had to be
aware of where she was, where he was, and where the enemies were to keep her from getting
overwhelmed.

She wasn’t defenseless though. She knew how to dodge and kick and that was enough that it didn’t
feel like her life was entirely in Jhonnen’s hands.

Which was important. He wasn’t sure how to handle the pressure of being wholly responsible for
another being.

“Over here.” She half-jogged across one room and Jhonnen stood guard while she fiddled with a
hidden lever.

“So where’d you learn to crack tombs?” Jhonnen asked. “Reclamation service?” He realized too
late that he was asking who had enslaved her last, if anyone, and that that was rude.

Vette eyeballed him before her eyes dropped to his pocket where the control rod was waiting and
she looked away.

“I’m not gonna use it.” Jhonnen said flatly.

“What not?” Vette asked, her lekku twitching with distrust.

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m stubborn, mostly.”

Vette furrowed her brow and he shrugged. He didn’t owe her the backstory and he didn’t need her
thinking he was soft. Well, softer, given that he’d already told her he wasn’t going to use the shock
collar. Maybe she’d assume he’d use more personal means of torture to motivate her.

Which was also bad because he didn’t want her scared of him. He just…

Jhonnen flung himself into combat with a small coterie of acolytes because fighting was easier than
thinking.

Bit by bit they made their way through the tomb, Vette stopping occasionally to get her bearings or
move something, Jhonnen wasn’t sure how much of it was relevant and how much of it was smoke
and mirrors but at the end of the day it didn’t really matter.

“Hey,” Vette got his attention as they reached a room in the depths of the tomb. “This is it. The
secret entrance to the hidden cavern is in here. Just… let me get my bearings.”

Jhonnen nodded.

His danger sense spiked and he whirled around, delivering a sharp kick to Vermin’s stomach and
sending the other acolyte skidding across the floor.

Jhonnen squared off as Vemrin got to his feet.

“Take your time, slave,” Vemrin spat. “Just have the entrance uncovered by the time I finish killing your new master.”

“I am in shock.” Jhonnen said flatly. “I thought we’d never see each other again. I firmly believed you were going to listen to Baras.”

“Shut up.” Vemrin spat. “You think you’re so funny.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m out of practice.”

“My passions run deeper than yours,” Vemrin growled. “I am the true essence of what it is to be Sith. My legacy has suffered long—”

Jhonnen forced shoved him backwards. “Dolgis didn’t share the ‘don’t monologue’ lesson, did he?” He darted forward and brought both swords down at Vermin’s head. Vemrin blocked and Jhonnen skidded backwards to disengage. They clashed again and Jhonnen headbutted Vemrin in the nose, breaking it and forcing his opponent’s eyes to water. Vemrin coiled the force around Jhonnen’s neck and lifted him into the air.

A rock sailed through the air and clipped Vemrin in the temple.

Jhonnen hit the ground, coughing for air. He rolled to the side to dodge Vemrin’s blow and kicked the other man in the chest. He swept Vemrin’s legs out from under him and stomped on his nuts when Vemrin hit the floor.

To finish it, he drove his warblade straight down through Vemrin’s chest. He turned to look at Vette, breathing a little hard. “Thanks.”

“Rather work for you than him,” Vette said. “It’s never a good sign when a guy just calls you slave.”

“We could get you a name tag.”

She laughed a little bit, seemingly despite herself. “The secret entrance is right here.” She pushed a button that was inset in the wall and the whole chamber shook as the two statues turned to face one another and a panel of solid stone slid out of the way into the recesses of the floor.

“Nice.” Jhonnen said.

Vette’s lekku twitched with appreciation. “It’s nice to be acknowledged, thanks.”

They headed through the secret door, Jhonnen taking point to battle the ancient droids left to guard Naga Sadow’s legacy.

“Wish I had my blasters,” Vette complained, stepping out from behind the statue she’d been forced to hide behind.

“Maybe later,” Jhonnen said with a small shrug. “Assuming I have any say it it.”

“You’re not worried I’ll just blast you in the head and make my escape?” Vette raised a challenging eyebrow.
Jhonnen shook his head. “I can block most blaster fire and you’re assuming I’d ever let my guard
down around you enough for you to make a move.”

“Fair enough,” she shrugged.

He reclaimed the lightsaber and lead Vette back out of the tomb and into the Korriban night. Vette
shivered and all Jhonnen could do was walk faster to get her inside before the cold really got to her.

Once back in the Academy, Vette followed Jhonnen up to Darth Baras’s chambers, neither her nor
Jhonnen certain of what was going to become of her. Jhonnen flashed back to his father’s lessons
and made a note to behave distantly and disdainfully towards Vette in front of Baras in case he
subscribed to the same mindset.

Baras’s expression was, as ever, unreadable behind his silver mask. Even through the Force,
Jhonnen could sense very little besides powerful darkness.

Jhonnen presented the lightsaber and Baras touched his chest as though overcome with emotion.

“I am beside myself,” the Darth proclaimed. “Not only did you get the Twi’lek to cooperate, but
you completed the task and claimed the ancient lightsaber.”

“Yes, my lord,” Jhonnen said, willing Baras’s attention to remain fixed on him and not on Vette.

“Vemrin was not in my chamber as I instructed. I take it he sought to stop you and claim the
ancient lightsaber as his own?”

“Yes, my lord,” Jhonnen said again. He was fairly certain Baras had sent Vemrin after him.
Vemrin wasn’t really an idiot, he would have known that disobeying the dark lord would have
meant death regardless of his success. “Vemrin’s dead now.”

“Bravo,” Baras praised. “I see you may indeed become one of the strongest Sith in the galaxy.
Your trials are over. You are now my apprentice.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen said before he could stop himself. “It’s an honor, my lord.”

“Mind your tone, my young initiate,” Baras warned. “This is only the beginning. With you as my
right hand we shall strike fear into the Empire’s enemies.”

Jhonnen didn’t care about that. And he didn’t care that apparently Baras was able to convene with
the Emperor when he wasn’t a Dark Council member. The Emperor almost certainly gave zero
shits about Jhonnen’s progress and Jhonnen didn’t care about Baras blowing smoke up his ass.

What he cared about was being one step closer to taking out Vitreous. One step closer to letting his
mother rest in peace.

“I’ll meet you at Dromund Kaas immediately, Master.” Jhonnen said, careful to keep his inner
monologue inner.

“You will find Dromund Kaas to be considerably more stimulating.”

No, he wouldn’t. Jhonnen had spent the last seven years on dark, depressing, soggy Dromund
Kaas. It wasn’t just more familiar and probably there would be more sith politicking which he was
bad at.

“Take the Twi’lek slave as my gift. Do with her as you wish. If she’ll be of use, by all means, take
her with you to Dromund Kaas.”

“Yes master.”

“You are dismissed.”

Jhonnen and Vette headed down the stairs and into the Korribani night.

“Oops,” Jhonnen said flatly, dropping the slave collar control rod out of his pocket and crushing it under his heel.

He looked at Vette in the darkness. “Look. You were a big help and regardless of your answer I’ll get that slave collar off you on the shuttle.” He took a breath and Vette stared at him. “But I need someone watching my back and as an apprentice I receive a stipend. I will pay you to stick around and throw rocks at people trying to murder me.”

Vette stared at him. She took a moment and considered, which Jhonnen appreciated. She dropped her shoulders and folded her arms over her chest. “Fine. But I’m better with a pair of blasters.”

“Blasters and new clothes at the space station it is. I pay you, I cover food and lodging, you stick around and help me out.”

“Deal.”
Getting to like you, Getting to hope you like me.

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen and Vette settle into a rhythm of working together

They had an hour layover between the shuttle from Korriban and takeoff on the *Black Talon* to get to Dromund Kaas and Vette spent most of it shopping. Jhonnen’s father had given him a stipend when he started at the Dromund Kaas Academy that was now functionally doubled by his position with Darth Baras, and Jhonnen was more than happy to spend it on Vette. She got a couple of outfits and a nice pair of blasters and Jhonnen figured it was too much to hope that she’d missed when the shop keeper had called her Jhonnen’s sugar baby.

“Have you ever been to Dromund Kaas?” Jhonnen asked as they headed towards the shuttle bay to catch their flight.

Vette shook her head. “This may come as a surprise, but Imperials don’t like aliens.” her lekku twitched uncomfortably, Jhonnen recognized the fear in them.

“Anyone gives you any trouble, and they’ll answer to me.” Jhonnen said, hoping he didn’t sound like an asshole for saying it. “Just because… it’ll go over more smoothly with the authorities if I deal with it. Because of the alien thing, like you said.”

“The alien thing.”

“A stupid choice of words.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You spend seven years isolated with a bunch of asshole sith and see what it does to your vocabulary.”

“Seven years?” Vette cocked an eyebrow. “Figured you were born to this.”

“Well,” he shrugged and gestured to the seats in the waiting area. “Sit down in front of me so I can get that collar off.”

Vette gave him a concerned look that he pretended not to notice.

“Yeah,” she said nonchalantly. “It totally clashes with my outfit.” She knelt down on the hard metal floor in front of Jhonnen’s seat and he produced some tools from a pocket to get the collar off. The smell of unwashed half-charred flesh hit him immediately and he wrinkled his nose, dropping the collar on the seat next to him.

“There should be a fresher on the transport.”

“Subtle,” she mocked him.

“You can’t enjoy that smell any more than I do, Vette.”

She stood up and rubbed her neck, her lekku shifted subtly to indicate her joy. “Thanks, my lord. I wasn’t sure you’d go through with it.”

“I’m a lot of things,” Jhonnen said. “And one of them is a liar. But I’ll be straight with you, Vette.
This partnership I’m hoping for won’t work if I’m not honest with you.”

She studied him for a moment and frowned. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty.”

She laughed a little bit. “Me and my baby brother the Sith, nobody’s gonna pick on us at school.”

Jhonnen stuck his tongue out at her. “You can’t be much older. You’re what, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-one,” Vette shrugged.

He cocked his brow defiantly. “You’re not allowed to bring up my youth as an excuse for anything.”

“That a rule?”

He shook his head. “I’m not big on rules. We’re adults… nominally, anyway, if something comes up we’ll discuss it. I want to eventually trust you, that’s not going to happen if we’re playing power games.”

“I thought power games were what Sith did best.” Vette popped her neck, still clearly reveling in having the collar off.

“Not this Sith,” Jhonnen stood up as they were summoned over to the *Black Talon* for boarding.

Dromund Kaas was exactly the same as it had been when Jhonnen had left it for Korriban. It was soggy and dark and depressing. Vette, however, was in higher spirits after their work on the *Black Talon*, which had been unpleasant but proved that they made an effective team.

And, had hopefully proved that he wasn’t some sort of sadistic megalomaniac. At least enough that they could work together.

A slave got their attention as they were checking into the arrivals terminal and bustled over, his head bowed in submission. “You’re the one, yes,” said the slave, never lifting his eyes above Jhonnen’s collar bone. “Not like the scabs that exited the shuttle with you. You radiate power, lord. I bow before you.”

Jhonnen gave a very small, disappointed huff.

“I serve Lord Baras,” explained the slave. “He sent me to meet his new apprentice. And I made sure I was here on time, I certainly did. Yes indeed.”

“I’m sorry then,” Jhonnen said, relaxing his posture. “As we’re several hours late.”

“I live to serve, Lord. The wait was nothing,” said the slave.

Jhonnen figured it might have been something of a reprieve, which was *depressing*.

“I’m just a slave who owes his every breath to the tolerance of Lord Baras. He ordered me to encourage you to explore Kaas City before reporting to him. When you’re ready, Lord Baras will meet you in his personal chambers.” The slave chanced a look at Jhonnen’s face. “You, uh, you will tell Lord Baras I was good, yes? That I served well.”

“You’ve done your duty and I’ll tell him so,” Jhonnen said flatly. He could never tell how he was
supposed to treat other people’s slaves, his instincts said warmly, but they might report the warmth back to their masters and it would get read as weakness and then he’d have to deal with that.

And he did not want to deal with that.

“You have my thanks, gentle juggernaut. I will see to it that your luggage reaches your new lodgings. I bow my head as you depart.”

“Wow,” Vette said, standing to the right and just behind Jhonnen, “what a weasel. Dromund Kaas needs some pest control.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes but didn’t disagree. “Come on.”

They stepped out of the spaceport into the constant Kaasian rain and Jhonnen flagged down a taxi. “Despite what he said, we should probably meet with Baras in the immediate future, but we could grab lunch first.”

Vette shrugged and climbed into the taxi. “I could eat.” She looked out the window as they flew over the jungle. “So is this where you’re from?”

“This is where I lived before Korriban,” Jhonnen answered.

Vette turned away from the window to look at him and Jhonnen kept his face as carefully blank as possible. He was not getting into his sob story background with a woman who owed him nothing. Not even sympathy.

Vette went back to looking out the window.

They landed in Kaas City and Jhonnen lead the way to a food stall he had liked as a child and ordered two bowls of curry, offering one to Vette. They found a place to sit out of the rain and ate in relative silence until Vette chimed up.

“What are people going to think about you sharing a meal with a twi’lek like an equal?”

“Either that I’m an idiot or a very lucky man,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “For the most part, that’s their business and not mine.”

“What about your rivals?” she challenged.

“No amount of thinking I’m an idiot is going to make you my slave. We’re partners in this, Vette. Anyone has an issue with that they can take it up with my lightsaber.” He tried not to be annoyed that he had to keep making the same point to her. It was an alien point and she had no reason to believe he meant it.

But he did mean it and having it constantly questioned made him wonder if it was a good idea.

They finished their meal and caught another taxi to head to the Citadel to meet up with Baras. Jhonnen had only ever seen the Sith Sanctum from a distance. The black metal of the Citadel was similar to the black stone on Korriban. He looked upon the height of Sith power and felt the old hatred bubble up in his lungs. He wished he could slam the doors and set the Sanctum on fire with every bloodthirsty, power-mad bastard trapped inside.

Someday, maybe, if he was clever and lucky and strong.

They landed and Vette stuck a little closer to Jhonnen. He pretended not to notice as they made
their way into the Sanctum and down to Baras’s chambers. Jhonnen didn’t make eye contact with the other supplicants as he and Vette wove down the stairs and eventually came to Baras’s office.

Vette stayed behind him, not quite out of sight out of mind, but with both of them hoping that Baras wouldn’t care about her enough to take note of her.

“Not a minute too soon,” Baras said, turning towards the door as Vette and Jhonnen entered the room. “Your timing is impeccable.”

This probably meant that they were later than Baras would have liked but not enough to anger him.

In the corner of his eye, Vette’s lekku twitched with fear and she mumbled, “Did it just get considerably colder?” under her breath.

“I see you decided to keep the slave.” Baras gestured to her and Vette held her ground with impressive fortitude. “I hope she amuses you.”

Jhonnen’s expression sharpened to a glare.

“I trust you’ve been acquainting her with her new environs?” Baras said. “Did my minion point you in the right direction?”

Jhonnen nodded. “He was very helpful.”

Baras remained unreadable, almost certainly that was the reason for the mask. He probably had an open face without it, one easily read because he hadn’t had to practice concealing his facial expressions in decades. “A properly beaten-down slave is the only trustworthy creature in the galaxy.”

Jhonnen felt a chill roll down his spine.

“Your responsibilities,” Baras continued, “will mandate contact with my various minions. Meet my directives, and you may do as you will to anyone you encounter, adversary or ally.”

“Should be fun,” Jhonnen said, holding his arms at his sides to keep his general appearance neutral and knowing that he wasn’t doing a great job of it.

“A lightsaber can only achieve so much, apprentice,” Baras advised. “The most powerful weapon in a Sith master’s arsenal is information. I have painstakingly built a vast network of spies and operatives embedded through the Sith, Republic and Jedi alike. I have fingers, eyes and ears everywhere.”

Which was very impressive, Jhonnen was sure. But what a man like Baras wanted with a skilled combatant such as himself or Vemrin, Jhonnen wasn’t sure. Personal bodyguard? Assassin?

Jhonnen, with his skin the color of blood and his only real skill being that he was quick with a lightsaber, wasn’t going to be spying on anything.

“What… uh… will I be?” Jhonnen asked.

“You’re my enforcer,” Baras said proudly. “Deployed to protect my interests, intimidate my rivals, and destroy my enemies. It’s time for your tenure to begin.” Baras straightened out and Jhonnen knew orders were about to follow. People had this thing about straightening up when they were going to give orders. “A military starship is touching down at the Kaas City cargo port, delivering a vitally important prisoner to me. You will meet Commander Lanklyn there and make sure he and
his men successfully off-load this prisoner.”

“Are you expecting trouble, my lord?”

“We must always assume that we are being plotted against. Especially when the stakes are high,” Baras said. “The importance of this prisoner cannot be overstated. Go to the cargo port now, and stay sharp. You are dismissed.”

Jhonnen and Vette bowed their heads and left the room. Her knuckles knocked against his on the turn and Jhonnen was transported seven years back to better days. Kira’s knuckle knocking against his and then her hand sliding into his palm. Kira’s thoughts finding his when they were foraging for food to keep watch over one another.

Kira’s thoughts being torn out of his own as his father’s ship left the spaceport.

“Uh… Jhonnen?” Vette elbowed his arm gently. “You in there?”

“What?” He looked around and found that he has walked to the taxi. “The cargo port,” he told the driver, sliding into the back seat with Vette.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine,” he replied, knowing he was not being particularly convincing.

They reached the cargo port and headed inside. Commander Lanklyn was a human cyborg who didn’t notice when they walked in.

“Hey,” Vette said. “Captain Oblivious—boo.”

Jhonnen snorted a small laugh and then cleared his throat in an attempt to pretend that he was a serious and dangerous Sith.

Lanklyn didn’t look convinced and past him, Jhonnen saw a man frozen in a slab of carbonite, probably the poor bastard Baras was expecting.

“Lord Baras didn’t need to send a welcoming party.”

“He felt otherwise,” Jhonnen shrugged. “And I’m not in the habit of arguing with dark lords.”

“My men and I have performed much more dangerous duties for Lord Baras,” explained Lanklyn. “The prisoner is frozen in carbonite, so he’s not a flight risk—and this is friendly territory. Surely we’re safe here.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Sith interests are complicated and even if they weren’t, if Baras says jump, I’m supposed to be in the air before I ask how high.”

Vette snorted, and Jhonnen had to agree.

“Yes, my lord,” Lanklyn looked askance at Vette and then saluted Jhonnen. “Whatever you say. Let’s get this oversized block of ice to your master.”

Lanklyn turned to begin doing just that when Jhonnen felt eyes through the Force. A trick Kira had taught him when they were playing lookout for one another. He drew his lightsaber and waited for three breaths.

“Not so fast,” said a man from the shadows, his blaster pointed as Lanklyn. “My master ordered
that block of ice. So, step away from the carbonite man and no one ends up in a grave.”

Jhonnen raised his brow at Lanklyn in a brief *I told you so* and spotted the sniper up on the boxes. Jhonnen was good with a lightsaber, but the fewer blaster bolts flying around, the less of a chance for anything unfortunate to happen.

“And you are?” He asked, keeping his tone personable and feeling better knowing Vette had her hands on her blasters.

“My name is of little importance,” said the newly arrived gunman. “I’m here to relieve you of your burden. Whether that includes your own lives as well is up to you.”

*Cute.*

Jhonnen felt another presence and instinctively reached out to the woman watching his back to let her know. He felt confusion and then terror and recoiled automatically. She wasn’t Kira. She wasn’t Force Sensitive. She didn’t and wouldn’t understand.

“Lookie lookie, if it ain’t Slestack,” a Houk and a couple of goons joined the party. The Houk was looking at Mr. ‘My name is of little importance’ rather than at any of the Imperials. “Your master be wanting the froze man too, huh? Too bad for you. It mine.”

An opportunity was presenting itself.

“Friend of yours?” Jhonnen asked Slestack.

“To know TuMarr is to hate TuMarr.”

Jhonnen nodded like this was sage wisdom. It was not.

“That go true for you too, Slestack,” TuMarr said. “If you don’t flee, this be like killing two stone with one bird.”

*Oookay*, thought Jhonnen. *Think.*

He had two gangsters who hated each other.

This was a problem that could solve itself.

He turned his attention back to the jabs being thrown and waited for the right moment to look at Slestack, a crooked smile on his mouth that wouldn’t have been out of place at a sabacc table in the seediest Nar Shaddaan cantina and asked, “you gonna take that?”

“Very amusing,” said Slestack. But then he considered. “I do relish the opportunity to rid the world of TuMarr and his drones. So I’ll be with you presently, instigator.” He took his gun off Jhonnen and pointed it at TuMarr, which was all the provocation TuMarr needed.

The gun fight erupted, giving Lanklyn the opening he needed to get the frozen prisoner off to Baras.

Vette and Jhonnen waited until everyone was dead and he turned to look at her. “I’m sorry.” The words slurred together in his haste to get them out.

Vette frowned at him. “That was you? What was that?”

“I felt TuMarr coming and tried to warn you.” He dropped his shoulders. “The last person I worked
with was Force Sensitive, it was how we let each other know trouble was coming.”

Vette nodded skeptically. “You just… reached into each other’s heads? Just like that.”

Suddenly Jhonnen felt defensive. He prickled. He’d revealed too much and now he was being mocked for it. Mocked for what he had shared with his best friend. “Yes.” He said sternly. “It won’t happen again. Come on.”

They reported to Lord Baras, Jhonnen trying to keep a lid on the bad mood his hurt had provided.

Baras explained that the man in carbonite was a top Republic agent who had almost discovered an untraceable spy on Nar Shaddaa. Baras was convinced there was a conspiracy and this man was at the center of it.

He might have been right, it didn’t overly matter to Jhonnen if he was or not. For the time being, he would strike where he was bidden. Baras congratulated them on their success and gave directions to Jhonnen’s new lodgings, a small one bedroom apartment near the Citadel. A place for Jhonnen to rest and wait until he was needed.

It was a nicer apartment than the one Jhonnen had shared with his mother, but it was similar in the layout. Vette got the bedroom. It had been an awkward conversation and Jhonnen had pointed out that he felt better knowing that anyone trying to gain entry to the apartment had to go through him. If they had company they’d say the bed on the couch was Vette’s.

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“Jhonnen?”

Jhonnen startled awake, tear trails snaking down his cheeks. He opened his eyes and struggled to understand the blurry shape above him, a lekku touched his forehead before it was brushed away. “Who?”

“Vette,” Vette said, coming more into focus above him. “Nightmares?”

Jhonnen wiped his eyes and shook his head, feeling the moisture that wouldn’t stop coming. He took a shuddering breath.

“You were crying in your sleep,” Vette said, her expression pinched with suspicion and worry. “Didn’t know Sith did regrets. Someone you killed?”

Jhonnen rolled to sitting and wiped the moisture away from his eyes. “Someone I couldn’t save.”

Vette got quiet, clearly regretting having said anything.

Jhonnen sat up, the blanket falling off of him, and rubbed his biceps like they were cold.

“Do you… need to talk about it?” Vette hedged, still staring at him.

Jhonnen huffed a little bit of a laugh and looked up at her. “Vette, do you really want to get into my backstory or is it easier for you to just see me as Sith?”

He wouldn’t rob her of her hate if hate was easier for her.

“You already set me free, most Sith wouldn’t have done that,” Vette offered like an olive branch. “And besides, I prefer knowing why someone’s sobbing woke me up in the middle of the night.”

Jhonnen nodded and looked away. It was easier to say when he couldn’t read the other person’s
expression. “I’m only Sith because my father tracked my mother and me down about seven years ago while we were living on Nar Shaddaa. Mom… Mom didn’t survive the experience.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” He tried to smile at her and it didn’t work. “I’m alright. It just hits me in the night sometimes. I’ll try and… I don’t know… keep it down.”

“…thanks.” Vette said, her expression masked and unreadable. She studied him for a moment before she returned to the bedroom and Jhonnen waved a hand to turn on one of the low lights. He wished, and not for the first time, that he had a memento of any sort of his mother. He rolled off the couch and headed for the kitchen to make himself some caf.

The next handful of days were spent running errands for Baras. Address the slave rebellion here, murder a sith lord there. Vette was a source of amusement during these tasks, quick witted and disrespectful. Jhonnen caught himself smiling more that he had in his entire tenure at his father’s house. He caught himself feeling grateful to her for it. In the evenings they either retired to their separate beds immediately or talked for a little while, never about anything important, usually just about whatever task Baras had assigned, but it was… nice.

Having her around was nice.

After a quick stop off for lunch, they made their way down to Baras’s offices. A scream, echoing through the metal corridor and strained as though filtered through cracking teeth, stopped them both in their tracks. Jhonnen steeled himself and forced his shoulders not to hunch. “I guess Baras’s guest is awake.”

“That was a person?” Vette shook her head. “I’m gonna be sick.”

“Wait here for me,” Jhonnen said. “I won’t be long but at least one of us shouldn’t have to watch Baras work.”

Vette’s lekku twitched with gratitude. “Sure. I’ll be here.”

He continued on alone. Baras had his prisoner strapped down. Lightning coursed through the agent’s skin, igniting his nerves with fire while he screamed and railed that he wasn’t going to tell Baras anything.

Which was not the answer Baras wanted. The Sith lord applied more pressure, twisting the Force around his captive to keep him alive, but barely.

It was sickening to watch.

Jhonnen cleared his throat a little to announce his presence. “You summoned?”

Baras huffed, clearly on the verge of exhaustion. “I can not break him!” Baras howled, throwing his arms into the air in frustration.

Jhonnen wisely kept his mouth shut.

“This is impossible,” snarled Baras. “An unknown power must be shielding this man, which only confirms my suspicions.”

On the table the agent took a moment to breathe.
“This Republic agent is the key to unlocking the threat we face,” Baras turned his masked head to glower at his prisoner. “I must harness my rage and frustration, they will lead me to an answer.”

Jhonnen nodded, privately entertaining the idea that maybe the agent had implants or training to keep a sith lord out of his head. Such things must surely exist. Instead he cleared his throat. “Yes, master.”

Baras exhaled. “There’s one last possibility to break him. I thought it impossible, but perhaps there’s a small chance you could pull it off.”

This did not increase Jhonnen’s confidence.

“Are you familiar with the Dark Temple, my apprentice?”

“I know the name, my lord,” Jhonnen answered. Something something epicenter of darkness something something forbidden ground somethin something.

“Over a millennium past,” Baras began to explain. “The Emperor claimed Dromund Kaas and made the Dark Temple the epicenter of dark Force energy. In the bowels of the temple he conducted horrifying experiments that drained the knowledge and life essence from all the greatest Sith Lords of the time.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen answered, trying not to think about the implication of murdering that many of your supposed allies at once. The Emperor was a monster, not that Jhonnen could say it. And he really ought to avoid thinking it too loudly.

“The Emperor created a device called ‘the Ravager’ that ate his victims’ minds and delivered to him their greatest secrets,” Baras said. He began to pace, the slow back and forth walk of a man revealing his scheme to an underling. Vitreous used this walk a lot of the time and Jhonnen had to grit his teeth to keep from vocalizing his hate. “No one could withstand the Ravager’s intrusions—even the strongest Sith Lords of the Empire confessed whatever the Emperor craved.”

“And you want me to go get it, I guess?”

“It maybe be my only chance to break this Republic worm,” Baras gestured disdainfully to the barely breathing man in question. “The Emperor keeps the Ravager hidden in the Dark Temple, which has, in his absence, become a death trap.”

_Fun_, thought Jhonnen.

“There’s a good chance the horrors that await you will be too severe. But,” Baras shrugged. “It’s worth your life to me.”

_Awesome_, thought Jhonnen.

“The legends describe a secret chamber in the depths of the Dark Temple where the Ravager was encased. You’ll know the device by its inscription. Be swift, apprentice.”

Jhonnen bowed his head and then hurried back to the corridor where he’d left Vette. She was leaning against the wall and acknowledged him with the tiniest smile that last a fraction of a second. “So?” she asked.

“We’re heading into a death trap,” Jhonnen said, as jovially as he could manage. “We’re going tomb raiding in the Dark Temple, a place used by mothers to frighten their children into good behavior.”
“Isn’t the Dark Temple supposed to be super off-limits?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen gave her a quizzical look.

“I was enslaved on Korriban for stealing things from tombs,” Vetter reminded him. “I do my research.”

“I am so glad you’re around for this because I did not do my research and I would probably die on my own.”

The tiny smile was back, and this time it lingered for a moment. “Nice to be acknowledged.”

Vette screamed.

She clutched her cheeks like she could tear into them with her short cropped nailed. “It’s in my head,” she protested weakly. “Ugh, I can feel it. Like snakes.”

Jhonnen felt the claws of the darkside press against the wrinkled cortex of his mind. Darker urges simmered just between the surface of his intentions. His bloodlust, his wrath, his fear. He felt them bubbling up. The shadows looked like Vitreous, coming to mock him for his weakness, coming to kill Vette to teach another lesson.

Jhonnen could taste blood in his teeth and it was almost sweet. If he purged the weakness himself he could deny his father the satisfaction.

Jhonnen pushed the thoughts aside.

_You’ll fail her like you’ve failed everyone else, whelp. Put her out of her misery now before the temple eats her._

“Vette,” the name was high and strained as it broke over his teeth. With great difficulty he unignited the lightsaber in his right hand and hooked it back to his belt. “Vette, give me your hand.”

“What?”

“Now,” the word was clipped and tense.

Her hand was shaking as it settled in his palm as lightly as she could. Jhonnen gripped her fingers in his and used the connection as a ground, pushing out what protection he could. This was his mind. His body. His… friend. The Dark Temple couldn’t have them.

Vette’s breath was ragged but it started to even out. “My lord?”

“Jhonny.” He corrected. “We’ll get through this, just hold my hand.”

Her fingers laced around his and he thought about Kira. Kira leading him home through the twisting tunnels of Nar Shaddaa’s underbelly. The memories burned and stung at the corners of his eyes. He almost wanted to crush Vette’s hand in his. He wanted to drop Vette’s hand. He wanted to scream and cry and kill.

“Your palm is sweaty,” Vette muttered.

“I’m terrified,” Jhonnen answered truthfully. “Come on, let’s find the thing.”
Vette kept her eyes peeled for traps while Jhonnen dealt with the expedition members that had gone mad, keeping himself and Vette mostly to the shadows and out of the way. Fighting with one hand tethered to Vette was challenging, but she was pliant when it came to being moved, using her blaster to help end the conflicts quickly.

They found the Ravager in the depths of the temple and Vette checked around the chest for traps, having to take her hand out of Jhonnen’s to do so. He set his hand on her shoulder instead, and when she’d finished and the Ravager’s was theirs, she slipped her hand back into his for their egress.

Neither of them said anything til they were in the taxi heading back to Kaas City. Vette shifted her legs to touch Jhonnen’s foot with her own.

“‘You’re alright,’ she said. “For a Sith lord.”

Jhonnen kept looking out the window, still feeling the effects of the temple. “Thanks. You’re alright for a criminal.”

“Something tells me you don’t have anything against criminals.” Vette said with a little snort.

Jhonnen shrugged. “Depends on the law, really. But tomb-raiding? Doesn’t bother me at all. The Empire is obsessed with the honor of people who died hundreds if not thousands of years ago. It’s banthashit.”

“Cultural heritage is important.” Vette shrugged.

“Yeah, but maybe not to the extent of modern neglect.”

“Fair enough.”

The taxi dropped them off at the Sith Sanctum and Jhonnen considered dropping the Ravager off the edge of the platform to the Kaasian streets many meters below. He couldn’t, of course, Baras would kill both him and Vette and he’d do so slowly, but still, Jhonnen considered it.

They headed down to Baras’s office without washing up, appearing before the dark lord stained and bloodied and sweaty.

“When I sent you into the Dark Temple for the Ravager, I thought it might be the last time I saw you, apprentice.” Baras managed to affect the edge of affection in his tone and it made Jhonnen want to vomit as he handed over the Ravager. “The prisoner grows weaker by the minute. There’s no time to spare. Stand back and bear witness.”

Jhonnen took a step back as Baras attached the device to the agent’s head. Vette took two steps back, standing almost behind Jhonnen so that when she turned her head he was blocking her view.

“Yes,” Baras said excitedly. “The Ravager has seized his mind. Excellent! In his condition we don’t have long before the ordeal liquefies all brain matter.”

“Perhaps a gentler touch would be more effective?” Jhonnen asked, averting his eyes from the way the Force sharpened around the Republic agent. Unseen tendrils hooked into the prisoner’s brain to dig for information at the expense of all else.

“The pain drives the machine’s effectiveness,” Baras snapped. “Republic worm, you have the information I desire. Tell me everything.”
The prisoner gasped raspily for air, his eyes wide but unseeing as he stared as some private terror.
“I am… Republic… Information Service.” He screamed but didn’t thrash. “On special assignment to verify… possible Imperial spy on Nar Shaddaa. Commissioned by… Jedi Council… acting on suspicions provided by… Master Nomen Karr.”

Baras tutted. “Nomen Karr. That’s a name I grow tired of hearing.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow, but it was Vette who said, under her breath in hopes that only Jhonnen would hear her. “Who?”

“Silence your pet, apprentice.” Darth Baras said evenly.

“She raises a good point,” Jhonnen said. “Who?”

Baras sighed. “Nomen Karr is a Jedi Master who infiltrated the Sith. I rooted him out, then he nearly destroyed me and fled.” There was a lot of bitterness in Baras’s tone. Too much for the simplistic explanation he was giving. “He’s dedicated himself to proving that the Sith have spies imbedded within Republic and Jedi ranks. I’ve thwarted him at every turn, but he is tenacious.”

That was a lot of bitterness.

Baras turned his full attention back to the prisoner. “How did Nomen Karr come to suspect my spy on Nar Shaddaa? Tell me, Republic wretch—what alerted him?”

Jhonnen listened to the halting and strained explanation that Nomen Karr had a new padawan and that she could sense a being’s inner nature. Which to Jhonnen felt like a poor basis for investigating something like spies. You could be a good person and be a spy, you could be a bad person and not be a spy.

Unless she could read intention and not just where someone was on an arbitrary moral compass, her power seemed kind of useless for politicking.

Not that he was going to say any of that.

Baras however, seemed impressed and kept digging. Finally, the Ravager killed the republic agent, emptying his mind. They had a handful of planets where Karr and his padawan had been, a rough idea of what she could do and Baras was looking at Jhonnen in such a way that he knew this was going to be his problem.

“Nomen Karr is a relentless crusader,” Baras said, beginning to pace again. “And this padawan and her unprecedented power threaten everything I have achieved. Your duties are likely to take you to the far reaches of the galaxy. I will need to deploy you at will.”

This sounded interesting at least.

“You shall have a starship of your own,” Baras said and Jhonnen fought to keep the surprise and delight off his face. “You’ve earned it. Go to my personal hangar and claim it.”

“At once, my lord,” Jhonnen gave a low bow.

“I must ponder our next move. Waste no time. Get your starship in my hangar and wait for further instructions.”

“Uh, yeah,” Vette said quietly. “Let’s go before he tells me to clean this up.”
Jhonnen nodded and lead Vette out to the corridor. “You’re on strike for domestic chores, remember?” He said, flashing her a small smile.

Vette smiled, clearly despite herself. “Can we swing by the apartment first? I don’t want to abandon my clothes.”

“Good idea, and it’ll take time for the ship to get in order anyway,” Jhonnen said with a nod.

They caught a taxi back to their apartment building and the atmosphere between them actively changed once the door was shut. Vette huffed and looked down at herself. “Do you want the fresher first or can I—”

“Knock yourself out. I’ll pack while you shower and then you can pack while I shower.”

“Yeah, I think you’ve got blood in your hair.”

“I use lightsabers, they cauterize instantly,” Jhonnen said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I do not have blood in my hair.”

“Not that anyone could tell with that color.”

“Har har go clean up.”

He packed up his clothes and ran through the Sith code to keep from feeling the boyish enthusiasm that came with getting his own starship. It had been the plan, hadn’t it? Insofar as preteens had plans. He and Kira hitting the hyperlanes as free traders.

But he wasn’t going to think about what could have been. What never was. He recited the code and changed places with Vette in silence when she emerged.

At least he wasn’t going to be stuck on Dromund Kaas.

He cleaned himself off and stood under the spray for a bit until his racing thoughts made it unbearable and reemerged in the living room. Vette was running her hand over the bumpy scars from the shock collar. She turned and dropped her arm as if guilty.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jhonnen asked.

“I was a slave,” Vette said. “When I was a little girl. Before I got free. Sort of full circle, I guess.”

“Born into it or…” Jhonnen shook his head. “You don’t owe me any answers. I’m just… curious I guess.”

“I can understand that,” Vette slung her bag over one shoulder. “My mother, sister and I were grabbed when I was little. I don’t remember much of it. We worked the mines on Ryloth, then they separated us. I got sold to a Rodian, then a Hutt, then some sort of weird three-eyed thing.”

“A gran?” Jhonnen asked.

Vette shrugged like it didn’t matter.

“You got sold a lot in a short period of time. You were a terror, weren’t you?” He said it with affection. The people she’d been sold to deserved to have been terrorized.

“I was never going to win slave of the year.” She looked around the apartment. “Anyway, the point is you know you’ve moved around too much when a Sith ship sounds like maybe having a home.”
“It can be home,” Jhonnen offered, hoping he wasn’t crossing a line. “I haven’t… where I’ve lived the last seven years has never felt like home. Perhaps it’s time we both found one.”

Vette wrinkled her nose at him, but her lekku twitched with bemusement. “Watch out I don’t start calling you ‘Junior’.”

“You start that and I will start calling you ‘mom’.” Jhonnen pointed at her. “You’ve been warned.”

The silence that followed them from the apartment to the spaceport was more pleasant than usual, simply an absence of words as opposed to a tangible thing in its own right. They reached Darth Baras’s hangar and paused in step to take the Fury class starship in.

Jhonnen had been into star ships as a boy. The Fury was always pretty near the bottom of the list of models he wanted just because Kira didn’t want anything to do with the Empire. Now that he was here, however, looking up at it, he couldn’t imagine a more perfect vessel.

“Wow,” Vette said. “Take a look at that. We’re going in style now.”

Jhonnen nodded. “I’m calling her The Sanguine Tide.” He gave Vette a smile. “Means bloody.”

“Also means hopeful.” Vette crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re not sneaky.”

“I’m sneaky enough.”

“No,” said a voice from behind them. Jhonnen turned, left hand shooting for the hip where his lightsabers was waiting. “You’re not.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Jhonnen asked. The interloper was a human male with no hair and darkside corruption staining the veins on his face.

“I’m here to kill you friend, for murdering the son of my master.”

“Grathan,” Vette said under her breath, hands on her blasters. “Remember Grathan’s place.”

“Good times,” Jhonnen lied, keeping his eyes on the new Sith. “I suppose an apology won’t cut it.”

“You’re funny.” The assassin shook his head. “That won’t save you.” He leapt at Jhonnen who shoved Vette hard to the side with the Force so he could block without the assassin seeing Vette as the easier target.

“Maybe I’ll kill your friend first.”

“Bring it,” shouted Vette, firing at him.

Jhonnen swept low with his leg and knocked the assassin to the floor. He dropped his weight on the other man’s chest and socked him hard in the face. The assassin threw him off and rose up. His deflected Vette’s blaster fire but that occupied his lightsaber. Jhonnen carved the assassin’s arm off at the shoulder and then severed his head, stepping out of the way as it bounced.

He looked up to Vette. “You alright?”

Vette stepped around the body, nodding. “Yeah. I’m fine.”
“Disrupting the Investigation”

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen and Vette travel to Balmorra to begin hunting down Baras’s spies. More importantly, Jhonnen makes an impression on Malavai Quinn.

“If anyone asks, our sleeping positions are switched,” Jhonnen said, sitting on the cot in the engine room. “Though I don’t really see it coming up.”

Vette leaned against the doorway. “I mean, sure, and I’m not complaining about getting the big bed but do you really want to sleep in here?”

Jhonnen nodded. “The engine’s soothing. If I sleep with no sound, I end up imagining assaults in the night. Being Sith involves a certain amount of paranoia.”

Vette nodded. “Works for me. I can sleep just about anywhere.”

“Out of necessity I would imagine.”

She tapped her nose and pointed at him to tell him he was right. Her lekku were relaxed. “So we’re heading to Balmorra first?”

Jhonnen nodded and stood up off the cot. “I’m going to leave my clothes in your room to make it easier to sell the idea that I’m sleeping in there, I’ll knock before I grab anything.”

“It’s your ship,” Vette said as he passed her, turning to follow him. “But I appreciate it, thanks.”

“It’s your room.” Jhonnen set his bag down by the dresser. “Toovee should be programmed for discretion even when it comes to Baras asking questions.” He frowned. “If not I’ll… deal with it later, I guess.”

“Do you always worry so much?”

“I’ve lived seven years in a society that punishes perceived weakness of any sort with murder.” Jhonnen shrugged. “If I’m paranoid it seems like the smart way to be.”

“I can see that,” Vette agreed with a small shrug. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, anything.” Jhonnen said, figuring that if he didn’t want to tell her he could just lie or whatever.

“In the Dark Temple you told me to call you Jhonny, what are the rules with that?”

“Rules?” He wrinkled his nose. “It’s my name. You use it. If we’re in a situation with more Sith defaulting to ‘my lord’ might keep them from thinking that you’re my weak spot or something equally fucking stupid and so might keep you safer, but my name is my name.”

“Most Sith don’t seem to use their names.”

“Yeah but can you imagine calling me ‘Tenebriated’ or something? It’d be ridiculous.” His mother
had named him Jhonnen. It was a piece of her that couldn’t be taken away. His *name* was important.

But he didn’t need to get into that with Vette.

“*Tenebriated,*” Vetter repeated.

“It was the first thing that came to mind.”

“You’re…” she paused, catching herself on the lip of disrespect and then suddenly remembering that she was speaking to a sith lord.

“Ridiculous?” Jhonnen helped.

Vette smiled a little and nodded.

He laughed, a short amused laugh but it felt *so good.* “Come on, we’re almost at Balmorra. Baras’ll be calling us soon.”

“Calling *you* soon. The less he knows of *my* existence, the better.”

“Agreed.”

They returned to the lounge to wait and didn’t have to wait long before they hit orbit around Balmorra and Jhonnen sent the ‘we’re here’ message off to Dromund Kaas.

“Ah,” said Baras as he flickered into place on the holoterminal. “You’ve arrived on Balmorra. Excellent. Your contact there is Lieutenant Malavai Quinn. I trust you’ll find him most helpful.”

“I’m sure he’ll be more than sufficient,” Jhonnen said, hoping it was true because he didn’t want to have to work around Baras’s agent in addition to working around whatever other troubles popped up.

“This is an important mission, and I only entrust the finest.”

*Naturally.*

“Quinn will meet you in his offices at Sobrik headquarters.” Baras said. “We will speak again as soon as he has briefed you.”

Baras vanished and the holoterminal went dark. Jhonnen looked over at Vette. “Imperials. This is gonna be *fun.*”

“Goody.” Vette rolled her eyes. “Can I wait on the ship?”

“I might need back-up.”

She sighed, but her lekku moved good-naturedly. “You *always* need back up.”

“I live to inconvenience you.” Jhonnen bowed before her.

Vette sputtered a musical laugh and wrinkled her nose with a smile. Jhonnen grinned at her and then headed to the cockpit to start the landing process. When he emerged Vette was holstering her blasters, one lekku over her shoulder. She swept the lekku back in a fluid motion and gave him a nod.
And together they exited the ship and spaceport for Sobrik at large.

Sobrik may not have been a military town in the beginning, but you’d be hard pressed to convince Jhonnen of that. Soldiers marched the streets, large fences barricaded off different parts of town. A huge shield protected the city from seemingly constant mortar fire that lit up the sky like fireworks.

Jhonnen and Vette took a left from the spaceport, following Baras’s directions to the office and barracks of his lieutenant.

There were two men in the barracks, not one, the small frightened man being threatened with death from his obvious superior, was probably not Lieutenant Quinn.

Which meant that the Lieutenant was probably the beautiful human male with black hair and ice blue eyes standing half a foot taller than Jhonnen himself. Jhonnen waited until the corporal scampered passed them to lead Vette the rest of the way into the barrack.

Quinn, probably, straightened when he caught sight of Jhonnen. “I apologize for the delay, my lord,” he inclined his head respectfully and then drew himself up to his full height to settle at parade rest. “Lieutenant Malavai Quinn. I’m to be your liaison here on Balmorra.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Jhonnen said, his eyes wandering over the Lieutenant for a moment before he corrected.

“And you, my lord.” Quinn nodded. “Lord Baras will brief you personally, but I’m to acquaint you with the climate here on Balmorra first.”

“That seems like a good idea,” Jhonnen agreed. “Seems… tense.”

Vette snickered.

Quinn pointedly didn’t look at her, though his eyes did narrow briefly. “Even though the Empire wrestled control of Balmorra from the Republic during the war, we were never able to completely eradicate them,” Quinn told Jhonnen. “There is a rather sizable resistance movement. No one wants to admit it, but it’s clear that the Republic is backing it.”

Good for them, Jhonnen thought and did not say. He gave a very serious nod, pinching his mouth to a frown. “That is troubling, Lieutenant.”

“Something tells me your presence here will leave an indelible impression on the state of things. I look forward to it.”

Did the Lieutenant just hit on him? Not that Jhonnen was complaining, mind. He just wanted to know.

The moment passed before he could try and take advantage of it.

“I have a secure line to Lord Baras,” Quinn said. “I’ll patch him through immediately.”

Great, thought Jhonnen, his eyes moving to the holoterminal as Baras appeared.

“Oh,” Baras said, folding his arms behind him. “I see you’ve convened with my apprentice. Very good, Lieutenant. Leave us.”

Quinn left.

Baras turned his face to Jhonnen. “Quinn owes his career to me, but we should keep the details of
your mission just between the two of us.” He willfully ignored Vette’s presence, which was fine with Jhonnen and probably fine with Vette. “We must act swiftly. Nomen Karr’s padawan has directed the Jedi’s suspicions to my undercover spy there on Balmorra. Do you remember this?”

“Yes,” Jhonnen answered. He half listened as Baras explained who Commander Rylon was and how, according to Quinn, the Jedi were already watching so Jhonnen had to go blow up a communication tower or something similar.

The important part was that Quinn had the equipment and information he needed and that he wasn’t allowed to tell Quinn what any of it was for.

“My lord,” Quinn said, returning as Baras summoned him and the holoterminal went dark. “I’ve prepared what you need for your assault on the satellite control tower.”

“Good.”

“In order to destroy the mainframe, you’ll mount this charge to the base and activate it. Then contact me and I’ll be able to detonate.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jhonnen nodded. He turned to Vette. “Ready to make some fireworks?”

Vette smiled at him a little bit and rolled her eyes.

But she was smiling.

They returned to Sobrik after blowing up the mainframe and wiping the mind of Commander Rylon’s son because the boy was an idiot but he really didn’t deserve to be murdered. The amnesia drug’s discovery had left them both quiet. Jhonnen, at least, ruminated over memories he wished he could forget only to find that those memories were the only happy ones he possessed. Forgetting them would ease the pain, but it would also change who he was.

And forgetting the last seven years would leave him vulnerable.

A conundrum.

And one he didn’t want to dwell on, so he forced his brain to change topics. “Should we invite the Lieutenant to join us for dinner?” He paused outside the cantina. “Or do you think we should eat just the two of us?”

Vette gave him a skeptical look. “Why would you want the lieutenant to… you don’t!”

“Don’t what?” Jhonnen asked.

“You think he’s cute.”

“He is cute,” Jhonnen said flatly. “I mean, he also looks a fair bit older than I am. But mostly I was thinking it would be polite.”

“You were not.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “I was… mostly. Anyway, is that a no?”

“I would prefer not to but if you want to flirt with him, I’ll eat on my own tonight.”

“Just the two of us it is,” Jhonnen gave a small shrug. “I know I like talking to you.”
They headed inside the cantina and ordered a small meal of bar food to a back booth where they could talk without being overheard and enjoy what passed for entertainment in Sobrik.

Everything about the town was depressing. A sense of desperation lingered over the cantina, the tell-tale signs that it was frequented by soldiers in a warzone, employing pretty girls with few other options.

The food was alright though, something to distract people from rations.

“Have you ever heard of Nok Drayen?” Vette asked over her wings. “Pirate? Terrified the criminal world for a few decades.”

“I’m from Nar Shaddaa,” Jhonnen said, rolling his eyes. “Of course I’ve heard of Nok Drayen.”

“He set me free.”

Jhonnen nodded. “I heard he used to do that, take out a gangster and free all the slaves. Some of the refugees I grew up around used to be slaves.”

“He was ruthless, but not a thug, you know?” Vette smiled at the far away memory. “Sort of a pirate prince.”

“You sound like you admire him.”

“Maybe.” Vette took a bite and shrugged.

“So you joined up?” Jhonnen took a drink and raised his brow at her, waiting for an answer. She must have been young, given that she was only about a year older than he was.

“Well I wasn’t going to wander off on whatever waste of a planet we were on,” Vette said simply. “I was the smallest on the crew, and mining had taught me to fit in tight spaces. Nok’s crew showed me how to steal.”

“So you really did learn from the best.”

She nodded. “For a long time, I didn’t feel bad about stealing. So much had been taken from me…”

He wanted to reach across the table and set his hand on hers, something small to demonstrate that he knew how she felt. But he didn’t know how she’d felt. Yes they’d both had everything taken from them but Vette had been placed at the bottom of the pecking order and Jhonnen had been placed near the top. They weren’t the same situation at all.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead.

She shrugged but her lekku twitched, sadness, gratitude. “It was a long time ago, anyway. You gonna finish your wings?”

He pushed the plate over to her, and wondered if he ought to tell her that he understood her lekku twitches.

When they’d finished, they headed back to the Lieutenant’s barracks, the sun just starting to sink and stretch the shadows out.

The Lieutenant was waiting for them, finishing up some other task and turning to salute Jhonnen as he entered the room. “I must be honest,” said Quinn as Jhonnen and Vette came close. “Your
success at the satellite control station and Republic crater outpost has surprised me, my lord.”

Jhonnen raised his brow in question.

“I computed the likelihood of success as nearly negligible. In my assessment, however, I only considered the capabilities of a typical Sith. Clearly, you are not a typical Sith. I will adjust future calibrations to account for your unprecedented abilities.”

He was being flattered. Usually being flattered put a bad taste in Jhonnen’s mouth, but Quinn had delivered the compliments flatly. As though he was just stating fact. And that made it a little more difficult to shrug off.

“We’d just met,” he said. “You didn’t know what I was capable of.”

“I take pride in accuracy,” Quinn said. “Otherwise I’m no good for you.”

Vette’s lekku moved with disdain and he was pretty sure she was all but calling the captain a kissass.

“Lord Baras is pleased,” Quinn continued, unaware of the insult. “He says it’s time to zero in on your prime directive, and he awaits your contact. My barracks are yours. Activate the holocommunicator in the next room to speak with Lord Baras, the line is secure.”

“Thank you, Quinn.” He turned to Vette. “I’ll be right back.”

“You got it.” Vette gave an incredibly lazy salute as Jhonnen headed into the next room to call Baras.

In the next room, which appeared to mostly be bedding for the troops and probably Quinn himself, Jhonnen found the holocommunicator and contacted Baras.

“I hope you can see the smile on my face, apprentice,” said Baras who was, as usual, masked. “You are turning me into a true believer.”

“I’m shocked.”

Baras ignored the flippancy. “I’m sure you’re impatient to complete your time on the little rock.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“With the satellite tower computer destroyed and Commander Rylon’s son neutralized, my spy’s tracks are covered. Now the only threat to Rylon ever being exposed is the man himself. It’s time to end that threat. Permanently.”

Jhonnen frowned. “Couldn’t I just extract him?”

“Extract him and the Jedi will have their proof. Just be sure to give Commander Rylon an honorable death. It’s the least we can do. I’ve had him imbedded within enemy ranks for decades. The extent of his contribution to the Empire’s interests is unrivaled.”

Jhonnen didn’t care. Jhonnen just thought killing the guy was a waste.

“I understand,” he said hoping his expression was more neutral and annoyed.

“The Jedi investigator must have no hard evidence that Rylon was killed to silence him. It must look like anything but a targeted execution. Annihilate everyone there.”
That felt particularly wasteful, but it wasn’t the sort of order Jhonnen could question. Not yet.

“Return to Lieutenant Quinn. He’ll prepare you for your final task.” Baras hung up.

Jhonnen strolled back into the other room where Quinn and Vette were pointedly ignoring one another. He offered a cheery smile which Vette tried to return and Quinn… saluted.

“Bar— Lord Baras says you’ll prepare me for this last step,” Jhonnen said to Quinn.

Quinn nodded and presented Jhonnen with a datapad. “Your final target is the Balmorran Arms Factory. The resistance forces recently captured it and made it their headquarters.”

“So breaking in is going to be exciting,” Jhonnen said, mostly to himself.

“Quite, my lord. An incursion into the Arms Factory will be a monumental feat.” He gave Jhonnen a very small smile. “I’m excited by the prospect of you laying waste to that place.”

“That does seem to be what I’ve best at,” Jhonnen said neutrally.

“The Republic command center is deep inside the Arms Factory, the most heavily protected installation on the planet. In order to reach Commander Rylon, you will have to make your way past all of the factory’s defenses—which are considerable.”

Jhonnen frowned. “How considerable?”

“Unknown, my lord.”

Vette pushed off the wall she was leaning on and came over to Jhonnen’s side.

“But,” said Quinn, his eyes never leaving Jhonnen, as though Vette did not exist. “The resistance will certainly have state-of-the-art security and attack droids. Stationed inside are an estimated one thousand of the Republic’s best trained soldiers. Specifically, Rylon’s elite squadron is responsible for some of the most precise, improbable resistance victories on Balmorra. They’re legendary.”

Jhonnen huffed a little laugh at the praise. “Personal favorites of yours, lieutenant.”

Quinn cleared his throat. “I’ve marveled at their tactical exploits, that’s all.”

Vette snorted.

Quinn pursed his lips with irritation and then cleared his face. “It will be a bright day on Balmorra when they are eliminated.”

“Of course, Lieutenant.” Jhonnen agreed with Vette but couldn’t exactly say anything about it. “Is that all?”

“One final thing: the investigator that the Jedi sent has been concentrating her activity around the Arms Factory. I have her under minute-by-minute surveillance. If she becomes a problem, I’ll contact you on your comlink.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Quinn looked moderately pleased with himself. “I’m on top of it. I will be here to salute you when the Balmorran Arms Factory is a smoking husk, my lord.”

Jhonnen nodded and he and Vette walked into the swiftly dwindling twilight. Vette looked at him
and pursed her lips in thought. “For a guy who we weren’t allowed to give any details to, that Lieutenant has a lot of details.”

“Yep.” Jhonnen nodded his agreement. “It was probably a test on Baras’s end. Making sure I can button up when the situation calls for it.”

“Think you passed?”

“Failing the stupid stardamn tests set up by older Sith tends to be pretty fucking disastrous. Let’s hope I passed.”

Vette was stealthy and Jhonnen was strong in the Force. Together, moving slow with Vette noticing cameras and alarms and Jhonnen dealing with resistance as it came up, they reached the Republic command center. It was probably a good thing they’d decided to strike in the night, the droids and alarm systems didn’t sleep, but it cut down on the number of soldiers from “a ridiculous sum” to simply “a lot.”

Jhonnen found Rylon’s squad in the heart of the command center, their leader nowhere to be found.

“...uncomfirmed reports suggest it’s Sith,” said the captain into his comlink.

“They’re confirmed,” Jhonnen said, striding into the room. “Hiya.”

“Commander,” said the Captain. “Contact confirmed, the enemy is Sith, repeat, the enemy is—” he cut off and then put a holocomm on top of the makeshift barricade so Rylon could appear.

Rylon looked at Jhonnen closely and scowled. “Sith, I know why you’re here. Be aware that these are the finest troops I’ve commanded in all my decades of duty.”

“Noted,” Jhonnen said, wondering if Rylon actually knew why he was there or not. It didn’t matter but it would have been nice to know.

“Captain Eligyn,” said Rylon. “Engage at will and hold the line. I’m coming with reinforcements. Rylon out.”

The captain, and everyone else, pointed their weapons at Jhonnen. “You’re about to find out what we’re made of,” Eligyn said.

Jhonnen shrugged. “Connective tissue, mostly.” He threw himself into the soldiers like a tiny red bouncy ball, all limbs and humming lightsaber.

He finished cutting down the Captain when Rylon arrived, turning his attention onto the old commander and noting that Rylon didn’t even have his hands on his weapon.

So, yeah, probably he knew why Jhonnen was there.

“You made quick work of them, Sith.” Rylon observed with a small nod.

“Seemed like the polite thing to do,” Jhonnen replied, leaving his lightsabers ignited.

“It’s unfortunate they were on the wrong side,” Rylon came close enough to look over the bodies of his men with something akin to regret. “They were excellent soldiers and exceptional men.”

“Pity they had to die then,” Jhonnen answered peaceably. He looked over to Vette to make sure she was still in one piece and then looked back to Rylon.
“This is a bittersweet day,” Rylon told Jhonnen, and then waxed poetic about how hard the life of a spy could be. Spend enough time pretending to be something you’re not and the lie becomes a part of you.

Jhonnen tried not to internalize that. “Well, it ends today, if that’s any consolation.”

Rylon nodded. “Before I embrace my end, there’s one thing I must know. My son,” his eyes dropped away from Jhonnen. “He was the only thing in the world that was truly mine. And in love, or weakness, I told him my secrets. I… I know you had to cover my tracks, but please tell me, did he face his end well?”

Jhonnen thought about Durmat, wheedling and pleading and then having his memory wiped. He nodded. “He faced me with his chin held high,” he lied.

Rylon didn’t need the unhappy truth. Not about to die as he was.

“Then I can die with a smile.” Rylon pulled his blaster. “When they find my corpse, there must be evidence of a valiant fight. We must make this look convincing, Sith. So I will not hold back. I will fight you as though you are my mortal enemy.”

“Fair enough. Vette?”

“Yeah?” Vette asked.

“Sit this one out.” He looked at Rylon. “If you win, she leaves unharmed.”

Rylon nodded. “Don’t let that happen.”

“I won’t.”

Rylon fired and Jhonnen deflected the bolt and rushed forward. With one blade he parried Rylon’s blaster fire and with the other he slashed at his opponent. Rylon was spry for his age and he’d fought Sith before. He kept moving, refusing to let Jhonnen close. Jhonnen reached out in the Force and grabbed Rylon by the neck, hoisting him into the air and then dragging him close. He drove his lightsaber through the man’s ribs and dropped him on the floor.

Rylon took one last labored breath and fell still.

Jhonnen’s comm buzzed.

“My Lord,” said the tiny Lieutenant Quinn that materialized in his palm. “I believe we’ve got trouble. I heard your entire conversation with Commander Rylon.”

“How?” Jhonnen asked.

“As I told you, I’ve been surveilling the Jedi investigator. Apparently she bugged Rylon’s quarters, and as she listened in on your conversation, I heard what she heard. The investigator knows everything, my lord.”

“Well… shit,” Jhonnen started moving to the exit, Vette jogging to keep up. “Where is she now?”

“She was heading to her ship, but I had my men move in and cut her off from the Republic landing bay. I am systematically blocking her avenues of transmission and escape, herding that Republic suck to her only hold—the spaceport at Sobrik.”

He certainly seemed to love his job.
Jhonnen nodded and then stopped. “Wait. Sobrik is Imperial territory. How is she…”

“My men report that she’s wielding a lightsaber,” Quinn explained. “This investigator is a Jedi Knight.”

Ah.

“Unless you stop her,” Quinn continued. “She’s more than capable of fighting her way through the spaceport and commandeering a ship. I’ll be able to delay the Jedi long enough for you to engage. But I advise caution when facing her.”

“Neat.” Jhonnen said flatly. “I appreciate the warning.”

“I will gather my remaining men and meet you at the spaceport. We will crush this Jedi.” Quinn saluted and signed off.

Jhonnen turned to Vette, still exiting the Arms Factory.

“He’s definitely useful,” Vette acknowledge with a small shrug. “Something about him still sets me on edge.”

“Probably the fact that he’s an Imperial.”

“Probably, but…” Vette shot out a camera as she looked for the words. “You’re Sith and you don’t bother me too much.”

“I did at first though, and I wasn’t always Sith. Quinn seems like he’s always been Imperial military.”

Vette snorted a laugh. “Probably learned to salute around the time he stopped shitting himself.”

Jhonnen grinned. “If not before.”

The Jedi knight was a tall woman with warm brown skin and a canary yellow robe. She wore her hood up, studying Jhonnen with dark blue eyes.

“You’re too late, Sith. I already transmitted the conversation between you and Commander Rylon to the Jedi Council. Nomen Karr has his proof.” She folded her hands in front her her, calm and fearless.

Distressingly empty.

“Now Master Karr and his padawan will track down and expose every Sith agent in the galaxy.”

“Probably the girl will die of old age before then,” Jhonnen said flatly, his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber.

The Jedi shook her head. Jhonnen wondered if she was being smug and just really good at keeping her emotions in. “I have purity of purpose,” she told him. “I seek neither thrills nor satisfaction. Unlike you, I am calm.”

“Not gonna lie, that sounds incredibly boring.”

Vette nodded her agreement.
“Living an enlightened life is anything but boring. The dark side shall fail you, Sith.” The Jedi put her hand to her heart and then gestured to him. “Save yourself. Surrender, and the Jedi Council will give you every opportunity to discover redemption.”

Jhonnen barked a laugh. “Look at my face, Jedi. Even if I wanted to surrender, your kind has a mandate of destruction against my species. Giving myself up would make me a colossal idiot.”

“Self-awareness,” Vette said out of the corner of her mouth. “Who’d’ve guessed?”

“I’ll offer you a better deal,” Jhonnen said. “You surrender and I make sure no one harms you because no one is trying to genocide human beings.”

“Surrender is not possible. I am in the right.”

“Wow, you’re frustrating.” Jhonnen wasn’t convinced her voice had changed pitch once in their whole conversation. He didn’t feel anything but the harsh barren waste of the lightside radiating off of her. Like her emotions had been deadened and cut off.

“I won’t kill you, Sith,” she said, irritating sure of herself. “But I am leaving. So, I’m going to have to incapacitate you.”

She leapt forward, lightsaber in her hand and Jhonnen threw his will forward, catching her in midair and hurling her off balance. He grabbed both of his lightsabers and leapt after her. Vette fired with both blasters to draw the investigator’s guard. The investigator drove Jhonnen back towards Vette and then reached through the Force to suspend Vette in midair.

This served as all the distraction she needed.

“Vette!” Jhonnen shouted and turned his head, providing the investigator with an opening. She sliced at his leg but Jhonnen blocked in the nick of time, burning himself with his own lightsaber but keeping the limb.

Vette hit the ground.

Jhonnen elbowed the Jedi in the face and then socked her in the throat. He sliced off her right hand and held his lightsaber at her throat just in time to hear the thunder of boots coming their way.

“You victory means nothing,” the Jedi said, the first thing he’d felt from her was desperation. “The damage has been done. The proof has been transmitted. So deal the deathblow, Sith. I am at peace knowing the greater good has been served.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, Jedi,” said Quinn as the boots stopped. The lieutenant walked forward. “No, that’s a lie, I’m reveling in it.”

From Quinn, Jhonnen felt emotion. Most of it was smug pride and self-satisfaction which, after dealing with the investigator, were welcome departures.


“I’m only doing my job, my lord.” Quinn inclined his head politely. “I had her monitored and screened the entire time. There was never any risk at all.”

“Gloat all you like,” said the Jedi investigator. “It means nothing. I remain at peace. And Nomen
Karr and his padawan will still defeat you.”

“Yeah, about that. What can you tell me about her?” Jhonnen asked.

“I will never betray her identity. I am resigned. Strike me down, I offer no further resistance.”

Jhonnen sighed and drove his lightsaber through her heart. It was a kindness, Imperial prison would have meant letting them torture her until they either broke her beyond use or got the information they wanted. A jedi prisoner was a powerful tool.

And Jhonnen hated the Sith too much to just hand her to them.

Quinn ordered a couple of men to clean the dead jedi up and walked over to Jhonnen. “Lord Baras will be anxious to learn what became of this,” Quinn said. “When you’re ready. I’ll contact him from my office.”

Jhonnen nodded and stifled a yawn. It had been a very long day. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He waited for Quinn and the other soldier to leave and then gave Vette a small, concerned, smile. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” she answered. “It didn’t hurt it just felt like all of my limbs had down the pins and needles thing.” She shuddered. “Uncomfortable, but not painful.”

“I’m glad it didn’t hurt at least.”

“Yeah, me too.” Vette stretched. “I’m exhausted.”

“Same,” Jhonnen let himself yawn, revealing his pointy white teeth. “That lieutenant is either a brilliant actor or on several stims.”

Vette laughed at that. “We should probably go check in on him.”

“Yep. If there’s one thing I love doing, it’s updating Baras.”

They left the spaceport together and headed back to Quinn’s barracks, eager to be done with Balmorra and get some sleep. The town was transformed in the black, red lights peppered the buildings, orange lights illuminated the blocky city streets.

An unpleasant little town. Darker that blindingly bright Nar Shaddaa, brighter than gloomy Dromund Kaas.

They let themselves into Quinn’s barracks to find him in conversation with Darth Baras.

“Then step aside, Lieutenant,” Baras said, catching sight of Jhonnen and Vette. “My apprentice has arrived.” He folded his arms behind his back as Jhonnen approached the holocomm. “Nice of you to join us. Quinn refuses to update me, insisting the privilege be yours. I assume the Jedi investigator has been stopped?”

“Yep,” Jhonnen answered, privately marveling that the straight-laced Lieutenant had refused Baras anything, even something so small as an update.

“I had hoped to avoid confronting the Jedi, but our hand was forced. What matters most is that Rylon can no longer be exposed.” Baras paused for a moment. “And how would you assess Lieutenant Quinn’s contribution?”
“He was irreplaceable,” Jhonnen praised. Because it was true and because it might make things go a little more smoothly for the Lieutenant in the future.

“High praise indeed,” Baras said. “Quinn, I believe you have sufficiently repaid the debt owed to me. I’m putting you up for a captaincy and transmitting an executive order allowing you to station wherever you choose. You are dismissed.”

Quinn’s mouth opened with shock, his blue eyes going wide. It hurt Jhonnen to look at because he knew what Baras was doing, it was just changing one debt for another and the happier Quinn looked the worse it was going to be when he figured that out. “Thank you, Lord Baras,” Quinn said, barely restraining himself. “If my actions benefit the Empire, they benefit me. I would have done the same regardless of our past.” He turned his attention to Jhonnen and gave a small smile. “My lord, before I depart, it’s been my extreme honor to serve you. You are the epitome of everything the Empire stands for.”

Jhonnen froze to keep the bile in his gut from rising up to his throat. Quinn hadn’t seen the Empire the way Jhonnen had seen the Empire. The Empire wasn’t some righteous conqueror, it was a thief, stealing lives and dignity and children from their mother’s breast. It was run by power-mad megalomaniacs.

He forced a wooden smile. “The pleasure has been mine, Lieutenant.”

Quinn saluted and left. Jhonnen turned his attention back to Baras.

“He will have his hands full,” Baras said smugly. “There are powerful Imperials dedicated to keeping him down. But if Quinn can overcome them and rise to the station he deserves, there is great hope for our Imperial allies.”

Jhonnen resisted the urge to roll his eyes. If it was useful to Baras to promote Quinn, Quinn would be promoted. That was how the Sith worked. Half the problems with the Imperial military would go away if the Sith stopped meddling. But instead of being one cohesive force, the Imperial military was several dozen private armies trying to work together.

“Given the chance, he’ll go far,” Jhonnen said.

“Either way it’s not worth worrying about. Quinn’s affairs are a speck compared to what we face.” Baras shrugged his shoulders indifferently, flapping his ridiculous Sith-wingspan. “Your presence on Balmorra is no longer needed. Return to your ship when you’re ready to leave. I’ll contact you there.”

Vette and Jhonnen waited for the holo to deactivate before looking at one another. Vette covered a yawn with her palm. “So… we’re leaving, right? On to our next exercise in domination and destruction.”

“I only dominate when forced.” Jhonnen cracked a small smile. “Or someone asks really nicely.”

Vette laughed and rolled her eyes. “You must feel forced a lot.”

“Maaaaybe.”

“Come on. Let’s hope the next place we end up has a beach.”

“It’ll be Nar Shaddaa probably so beaches no, fancy hot tubs yet.”

“Oh you so owe me an hour in a fancy hot tub.”
Jhonnen nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

They left the barracks and returned to the spaceport, both contentedly thinking about sleep because even though it wasn’t really late by Balmorran standards they’d had a full day and jet lag.

They found Quinn looking considerately at The Sanguine Tide. Jhonnen pursed his lips in confusion as they came up behind him.

“Captain?” Jhonnen asked.

Quinn turned around sharply, landing with his heels together.

Jhonnen wondered if they made military men practice that spin.

“My lord,” Quinn saluted. “I hope you don’t find my appearance here obtrusive. I beg an audience.”

“Uh, sure,” Jhonnen shrugged. “What’s on your mind?”

“As you know, Lord Baras enabled my reassignment anywhere I choose. It is an evolution I’ve longed for and assumed would never come.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“Aiding your mission on this planet has reawakened the ambition I began my career with—to make the most profound impact possible for the Empire.”

“A worthy goal,” Jhonnen bit down on a yawn, knowing that Quinn had a point but not being sure where or what it was.

“I cannot think of a more glorious and honorable way to make a difference in the galaxy than to serve you.” Quinn dropped to one knee in front of him. “I’m here to pledge myself to you. I’m ready and willing to serve in whatever capacity you see fit.”

Jhonnen looked to Vette. Her lekku twitched with discomfort but Jhonnen needed the extra manpower and Quinn had proven himself effective.

“What can you do, Quinn? I don’t really have soldiers for you to command or anything.”

“Who cares what he can do,” Vette said with an eye roll. “I could use the help.”

“Point taken.”

“My lord,” Quinn said, tilting his head up to look at Jhonnen’s face and wow it was an unfair angle with the hangar lights glinting in Quinn’s eyes. “If given the chance, I know I will prove myself to you. I’m a top-notch pilot, military strategist and a deadly shot. I can fly this ship, plan your battles, assess your enemies and kill them. You won’t find a more tireless and loyal subject. I offer my military prowess and dedicate every ounce of my strength to your cause.”

“How could I possibly refuse all that,” Jhonnen gave him a smile. “Welcome aboard.”

Quinn stood up. “I’ll submit my reassignment papers as we depart.”

“I’ll go… make up a room for the Captain,” Vette said.

Jhonnen opened his mouth to tease her about being on strike for domestic chores when he
remembered that her stuff was in the largest bedroom and his stuff was in the engine room and with Quinn around they had to switch.

He would be lost without her. Or at least substantially more embarrassed.

“Where are you from, Captain?” Jhonnen asked, making conversation to fill space.

“Dromund Kaas, my lord. And you?”

“The same,” Jhonnen couldn’t tell if he was lying or not. Born on Dromund Kaas, raised on Nar Shaddaa, forced back to Dromund Kaas.

Things the Captain didn’t need to know.

They made their way slowly up the ramp and into the ship, catching the tips of Vette’s lekku as she hurried into the engine room.

“Make yourself at home,” Jhonnen told Quinn. “I’ve got to call Baras and then I’ve got to sleep.”

“Of course, My Lord.”

Jhonnen left Quinn to explore his new home and flipped on the holoterminal. He looked up at Baras as the dark lord came into view.

“Apprentice,” he said. “I see you are ready to put Balmorra behind you. Good. The elimination of Commander Rylon grants security to my spy network, but there is still more to be done.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Yes, my lord.”

“When all this is over, there will be time to relax.” Baras clicked his tongue as he said it. “Now, before I unleash you on Nomen Karr and his padawan, you must eliminate my spy on Nar Shaddaa. Head there immediately.”

The terminal went dark and Jhonnen dragged a hand down his face before shuffling to his room and closing the door. He stared balefully at the large black bed and flopped onto his face on it, bringing his arms up to curl around the pillow.

It was quiet.

He exhaled through his nose.

The door splintered inwards and Vette screamed. Black boots thundered into the small apartment. Jhonnen was on his feet. He turned to get to his mother, tripping over Vette’s corpse as he tried to run.

The assailants all had Quinn’s face. I’m sorry my lord.

Blaster fire caught him in the spine. He missed his mother’s hands by inches and fell.

And fell.

And fell.
Jhonnen bolted upright, gasping for air. He looked around the pitch black of his bedroom and flicked the dim light on with a wave of his hand. He was twenty years old. He was aboard a spaceship. He shook the remnants of the dream off and changed from the clothes he’d slept in to his actual pajamas because something something no one must know what a mess he actually was.

In the fresher, Jhonnen made sense of his dream. The feeling that something was going to go wrong remained. The sense that he was in danger. But he was a Sith apprentice, he would be in danger for the rest of his life. From Jedi, from other Sith, from everything. Jhonnen left the fresher and went to make a pot of caf, finding the carafe still warm.

The engine room door was closed.

He wandered into the cockpit and found Quinn at the helm.

“You’re up early.”

“I pride myself on it, my lord.” Quinn said, coming to standing. “I wasn’t expecting you at this hour, was there enough caf left?”

“Yeah, plenty.” Jhonnen bit back a yawn. “Do you prefer Malavai or Quinn when we’re just talking?”

“I’m afraid I’m more used to Quinn, my lord.”

“Quinn it is then. How’s your morning?”

“I have settled into my quarters and fully acquainted myself with the ship. I am at your disposal.”

Jhonnen nodded. “You can relax. It’s just Vette and I so things are pretty informal around here.”

“I am more at home saluting than shaking hands, my lord,” Quinn said uncomfortably. “And even more in my element behind the helm.”

Jhonnen took a drink of his caf and nodded.

“I am fully trained in all aspects of operating this vessel,” Quinn told him. “I can navigate and pilot it to perfection.”

“Awesome, because Vette and I can manage in a pinch, but it’s nice to have someone who really knows what they’re doing behind the helm. And if something comes up and you notice something screwy or don’t like the direction I’m heading, speak up.”
“I will make such things clearly known, you can count on me.”

“I will.” Jhonnen assured him. “And thanks for the caf.” He started to leave, got to the door, and had to double back. “Oh, set course for Nar Shaddaa.”

“At once, my lord.”

Jhonnen swanned back into the lounge and settled on the couch, stretching his back out with his mug on the nearby table. He dozed off there, listening to the miniscule noises of Toovee going about his chores and Quinn in the cockpit.

After a while Vette emerged, and Jhonnen rolled to sitting. She studied his face and then yawned. “Is there more caf?”

“I can make more while you’re in the fresher.”

“Aren’t you worried about Captain Uptight catching you making caf for a dirty alien?”

Jhonnen snorted. “If he’s going to be around he’s going to have to get used to it. Besides, I could use a refresh myself.”

Vette met him in the galley after her turn in the fresher and poured herself a mug full of caf. She studied him for a moment. “So… you didn’t just know about Nok from the history books.”

Jhonnen shook his head. “I wasn’t born Sith.”

“You mentioned. What were you born as?”

“Nar Shaddaan street scum,” Jhonnen tried for a smile and felt it fall flat. “I was raised by my mother. She went from being a Sith’s kept woman to a prostitute in order to keep me from the Korriban Academy.”

Vette winced. “Do I want to ask where she is now?”

“My bastard father wouldn’t even let me bury her. Told me that I needed to distance myself from her weakness.”

“You must hate him a lot.”

“A sith feeds on hatred,” Jhonnen looked at the floor. “Someday, I’ll kill him for what he’s done to me and to everyone I care about.”

Jhonnen’s mood got darker and darker the nearer they drew to Nar Shaddaa. Despite promising himself that he wouldn’t, Jhonnen was in the cockpit when the Smuggler’s Moon came into view. Big and filthy and glittering.

Jhonnen closed his eyes like he was preparing for a blow.

Seven years.

“Lord Baras is on the holo, my lord,” Quinn said, unaware of Jhonnen’s inner battle. “Shall I send it to the holoterminal while I bring us in for a landing?”

Jhonnen nodded. “Yeah.” He left the cockpit and headed for the lounge, giving Vette a threadbare smile where she was reading on the couch.
“Ah apprentice,” Baras said in his usual tone. “I see you’ve landed on Nar Shaddaa. It is, I’m afraid, the armpit of the galaxy.”

“Then I’ll try not to linger,” Jhonnen said, biting back every I know and I’m from here because he didn’t want Baras knowing his backstory. Baras probably already knew more than Jhonnen wanted him to.

“Then you must remain focused.”

Jhonnen bristled a little.

“I understand you are familiar with Nar Shaddaa, apprentice, so I shall skip the pleasantries. You are there to eliminate my spy, Agent Dellocon. Normally, it would be a trifling task, but Dellocon has acquired a powerful ally.”

“Oh?”

“Agent Dellocon’s new benefactor is a young Sith Lord named Rathari, an upstart who openly disrespects my methods. Rathari prefers a more blunt approach. The Dark Council has granted him dominion over Sith interests on Nar Shaddaa.”

“Well that’s not going to last much longer,” said Jhonnen, who did not care about the Dark Council’s reasons for much of anything.

“I would celebrate the day that nuisance was quelled,” Baras told him. “Agent Dellocon knows much about my organization. I cannot have Rathari in possession of such a resource. Burn Rathari to the ground. Destroy everything he’s working for,” Baras instructed and then added, as almost an afterthought, “and kill Agent Dellocon.”

Jhonnen did not believe that was an afterthought. Baras was trying to fuck with him. To see how Jhonnen prioritized things.

“Halidrell Setsyn runs my slave operation on Nar Shaddaa. She has been a valued operative for many years. She is ready to receive you and can fill you in on Rathari’s movements and interests. That is all.”

Jhonnen looked at Vette after Baras hung up. “I want you with me for this,” he said quietly, trusting that Quinn wasn’t actively eavesdropping.”

Vette nodded. “Beats sitting around here.”

Jhonnen headed into the cockpit. “Vette and I are going to go take care of Baras’s business. In the meantime, if you think of any upgrades the Tide could use, you have access to the accounts to make changes. You’re our pilot so I leave that sort of decision up to you.”

“Yes, my lord, thank you.”

His father hadn’t even dragged him to the spaceport himself, entrusting one of his jackbooted thugs with the privilege. Jhonnen could still remember thrashing uselessly. Kicking and screaming and nobody cared. They saw a Sith lord and decided not to get involved.

Jhonnen and Vette left the spaceport and took a taxi to the Corellian sector where they were supposed to meet with Halidrell Setsyn.
“Slave operation,” Vette said, looking accusatorially at him. “That sounds *fun.*”

“The first person to suggest I slap a slave collar on you gets a lightsaber through their *eye socket,*” Jhonnen promised. “It’ll be fine.”

Vette frowned at him but settled into her seat. “Are you doing alright?”

“As long as we don’t have to go to the Red Light Sector, I can hold it together.”

They left the taxi when they hit the Corellian sector and made their way together through Nar Shaddaa’s narrow streets and neon lighting to where they were supposed to meet Halidrell.

She was a human female (no surprise there) of average height and build currently staring down three armed exchange gunman.

“Take one step closer and there’ll be two dozen Sith surrounding you,” said Halidrell to her opponents. Jhonnen sighed even as the Captain pointed out that two dozen made it an *obvious* bluff.

How the hell was she in charge of operations if she didn’t know how to bluff?

Jhonnen cleared his throat. “Oh, she’s got Sith.”

“See,” said Halidrell evenly. “Not so smug now, are you, Captain?”

“So you *do* got a Sith up your sleeve. Well, we’ve been trained to take out Sith. Time to flex our muscles.”

“I will let you talk your way out of this,” Jhonnen said.

“Unless you’re planning on killing yourself, there ain’t nothing to talk abo—” The captain slumped over dead.

Jhonnen looked at Vette.

“What?”

“You’re my hero.” He ignited one of his lightsabers and looked at the two remaining goons. “Gentlemen, you may leave with your legs or without them.”

The goons booked it.

Jhonnen turned his attention back to Halidrell.

“You have a flair for dramatic entrances,” she told him. “I probably could have handled that, but I’m grateful for your timing.”

It did not look like she’d had the situation under control.

“You’re the apprentice Darth Baras prepped me for, yes?”

“That’s me,” Jhonnen said with a small shrug. “I’m to be taking out Rathari’s operation.”

“Won’t be easy. He usually just appears, devastates, then disappears. You’ll have to draw him out. He’s been making some major power plays and disrupting them will get his attention.”
“I do love being the center of attention,” Jhonnen said, mostly as an aside. He hated it when things got political and with the Sith they always seemed to get political.

The problem was that he didn’t have the brain for it. He wasn’t a genius he was just kind of clever. Most of his skill was in combat and that would be fine if it didn’t make him an obvious pawn in the schemes of others.

And he hated being a pawn.

He refocused on Halidrell as she filled him in on the moves he was supposed to be making as Baras’s pawn. Rathari was strong-arming the Hutts… which was suicidal and stupid but apparently working for him.

Jhonnen’s role was somehow even less safe. He was supposed to go break up the meeting and stop the Hutts from handing over the territories Rathari wanted without pissing off the Hutts.

This plan was insane.

But it was the plan they had.

Halidrell smiled at him. “When all this intrigue is over, and Rathari is a memory, maybe we can get to know each other better.”

Jhonnen frowned a little. “Perhaps.”

“If killing a Sith Lord doesn’t make you feel social, not much will.” Halidrell said with a small shrug.

Was she actually hitting on him immediately following telling him to storm a Hutt meeting or was he imagining things?

He looked at Vette from the corner of his eye and caught the annoyed puzzlement on her face. So yes. That had actually happened.

“I’m going to go deal with Rathari. I’ll return afterwards.”

The Hutt Cartel safe house that Halidrell knew Rathari was meeting at was in the Duros sector, right next door to the Red Light District. Jhonnen clenched his jaw so hard it started to ache. He missed his mother, Isixia. He missed Vivex at the club. He missed Kira.

He missed Kira the way he imagined he’d miss his left arm.

He reached out his thoughts to find her, seven years apart but that sort of bond felt like it would outlast the distance. Seven years apart and… nothing.

“Jhonnen?”

“I’m fine, Vette.”

“Jhonnen, you’re crying.”

He reached up with one hand and felt the moisture around his eyes. “Shit,” he squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath, trying to master his emotions.

“Maybe it would help to go back,” Vette suggested. “After we deal with Rathari, I mean. But
maybe you can find some of your people again.”

Jhonnen took a deep breath and nodded. Maybe it would help.

Eyes dry, Jhonnen lead the way to the Hutt Cartel safe house to interrupt Rathari’s meeting, hoping that the master himself would be there and that he hadn’t just sent his apprentice.

It was just the Zabrak apprentice.

Jhonnen struggled to keep a lid on his disappointment, taking a moment just outside the room to listen and compose himself. Hutts responded to strength, finesse and bribery. He could do one of those things well and two of them in a pinch.

But it really was a pinch.

<< Your master is a hard man, Girik. >> said one of the two Hutts present. << It’s not easy to trap a Hutt, let alone the entire Cartel. It seems we have no other choice. >>

“Gentlemen,” said Jhonnen, entering the room. “I’m delighted to present you with an alternative.”

<< This is a closed session, >> protested the other Hutt. << Who are you? >>

“I’ll tell you who this is.” Girik turned around and pointed an accusatory finger at Jhonnen. “This is the apprentice of an over-the-hill Sith named Darth Baras.”

“Jhonnen,” Jhonnen introduced himself to the Hutts with a small bow.

“My master and I anticipated your arrival.”

“And you get a gold star for it,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “Where is Rathari, anyway?”

Girik snarled. “I am Lord Rathari’s proxy in dealing with the Cartel. And I will be his sword arm dealing with you.”

“Surely the Hutts deserved a personal touch,” Jhonnen said, wrinkling his nose. “Out of politeness if nothing else.”

<< Oh hoho, >> said one Hutt to the room at large. << It seems another Sith suitor appears. Tell us your purpose, dark one. >>

“I’m here to keep Rathari from making the mighty Hutt Cartel his pawn,” Jhonnen said. He wasn’t great at flattery but his mother had taught him what she could while she was alive.

<< There are proper channels to seek our audience, Sith, >> said one Hutt.

<< You stack the odds further against yourself by angering us. Not very smart. >>

‘Not very smart’ was Jhonnen’s middle name. Or would have been if his middle name hadn’t been Maikim.

Vette took a step closer to him.

“My goal is to relieve the Hutt Cartel of the burden presented by Rathari,” Jhonnen replied.

<< We have seen Rathari’s strength firsthand. We know nothing of yours. >>
"Fight Girik," suggested the other. "Let us see who is superior. If you survive, we will consider delaying our treaty with Rathari."

Jhonnen nodded and turned to Vette as the Hutts made bets between themselves. "Sit this one out."

Vette frowned at him and looked warily at the Hutts. "Do not leave me alone with these people."

He smiled at her, "I won’t," and turned to face Girik. "Let’s dance."

Vette moved to the other side of the room, out of harm’s way, and Jhonnen and Girik ignited their lightsabers. Jhonnen made the first move, a clear lunge. Girik parried and swiped at Jhonnen’s head. Jhonnen blocked and drew his back foot forward so he popped up under Girik’s guard in order to headbutt him in the face. Girik staggered back, helped by Jhonnen’s foot in his sternum.

“Bastard,” hissed Girik.

“Nope,” Jhonnen parried the thrust. “I know both of my parents.”

He had to win.

Now, Jhonnen accepted that most of the time he had to win. He had to win or Vitreous stood a good chance of living to old age and that was beyond the pale. But this was different.

Vette had asked him not to leave her alone with these people. If he lost, she was as good as enslaved again. And Jhonnen wasn’t going to be the guy who fucked that up.

And in the meantime he could put on a good show for her.

Girik charged, incensed by Jhonnen’s devil-may-care expression, he launched himself forward. Jhonnen juked to the side as the last split second and gave Girik a little push to help him to the floor. He stomped hard on Girik’s hand to force him to let go of his lightsaber.

Girik shouted with pain and curled slowly up to kneeling on the red carpet. Jhonnen pointed his lightsaber at Girik’s throat.

"Im—possible," Girik rasped. "Lord Rathari… will still be you and your master’s… downfall…"

"Uh-huh." Jhonnen nodded, unconvinced.

“I will not die… by your hand.” Girik summoned his lightsaber back into his grasp, “but… by my… own!” He drove the blade through his stomach and collapsed forward, dragging the weapon up through his chest.

Jhonnen wrinkled his nose and turned to look at Vette, who returned faithfully to his side.


<< Defeating Girik is one thing, Sith. Lord Rathari will be another. We’ve never seen such a vicious animal. >>

“I can handle him,” Jhonnen said, hoping he was right.

<< Your petulance is most amusing. And the idea of not having to deal with Rathari is invigorating. >>
<< Trust that we will not agree to Lord Rathari’s terms unless you fail. We will be watching for word of the results. Goodbye. >>

Jhonnen and Vette left quickly and headed back to Halidrell’s shop in the Corellian sector.

Quinn probably would have been upset about the loss of Imperial life, but Quinn wasn’t there and the Imperials had attacked Jhonnen first. Jhonnen turned his attention to the Republic garrison Rathari had been trying to take and blew up a fuel cell they’d stupidly left exposed. This gave him and Vette a clear walkway up to where the small contingent of soldiers was cowering. The man in charge stood up, handed his blaster rifle to his second in command, and approached Jhonnen.

Which was new and exciting.

“Sith,” the commander said. Jhonnen was briefly distracted by his muttonchops but nodded his head that he should continue. “I am Commander Naughlen. I’m in charge of this defensive. I’m unarmed.”

“That takes guts,” Jhonnen praised. “Most Republic Commanders wouldn’t just walk up to a Sith like this. Mostly it’s screaming and blasterfire. Nice change of pace.”

The Commander… nodded. “I doubt a blaster would save me.”

“That’s true,” Vette said out of the corner of her mouth.

“We do not wish a fight,” continued Commander Muttonchops. “But we also cannot relinquish this area. What are your terms?”

“I’m legitimately just interested in ruining the day of the resident sith lord.” Jhonnen shrugged. “However, I’m not going to say no to a pack of commandos with a blood debt. I will need you eventually, and I expect you to remember that I let everyone live. I didn’t even maim anyone.” The fear was a useful tool, no matter how much Jhonnen hated to lean into the trope.

Muttonchops nodded. “Very well. If your mission does not conflict with Republic interests, I pledge to help you. Here is my holofrequency. I will answer your call, you have my word. Until we meet again, Sith.”

“Laters,” Jhonnen turned and left listening to Muttonchops give the order to tend to the wounded now that they fighting had stopped.

Jhonnen and Vette got a little ways away when Jhonnen’s holo went off.

“My lord!” Halidrell shouted. “My base…! My Base is under attack! The last of my men and I are holded up in the command center. But the doors are about to give.”

“I’m on my way. Do whatever it takes to secure yourselves.” Jhonnen instructed, taking off at a jog back towards the taxi. He switched the call from visual to audio and listened to Halidrell scream that the command center had been breached.

She would be dead before they reached her.

Jhonnen and Vette picked through the bodies. Halidrell’s operation hadn’t been small. Jhonnen could hope that some men hadn’t made it back to headquarters, but there were a whole lot of bodies.
“Well, Baras won’t be running slaves through here for a while, at least,” he said as an attempt at levity. It was hard feeling any pity for Halidrell, knowing what her business had been, but it was still disheartening to see so much death.

There was a holorecording near her body, and Jhonnen turned it on, watching Halidrell’s murder as Rathari had intended. He listened to the threats and the offer of a duel if Jhonnen could reach him and Jhonnen turned the holo off to look at Vette. “You can head back to the ship if you want, I can see if Quinn’s as good a shot as he claimed.”

“I’m fine,” Vette said stubbornly. “But you have to know that Rathari’s not going to play fair.”

“Of course. He’s a Sith lord. Honor is mostly just something they shout about.” Jhonnen frowned. “Think we should use Muttonchops?”

“It would even the odds a bit,” Vette agreed. “Do I get to play secretary?”

Jhonnen cracked a little smile. “The role you are least suited for in the great theater production that is my life.” He produced his holo and put in the call.

Muttonchops appeared in his palm. “I had a feeling you’d call, Sith. Can’t say I’m looking forward to this.”

“I’m about to ask you to attack a Republic enemy. You should be grateful.”

Muttonchops looked confused for a moment and Jhonnen shrugged. “Sith in-fighting. I want you and your men to make your way discreetly to the Network Access sector, top of the biggest building. Once there, wait for my signal and then come down on my enemies.”

“We’ll do it, Sith. But then I want this over between us.”

“Absolutely.” Jhonnen hung up and then called Quinn. “Hey, how’re things at the ship.”

“My lord, things have been quiet. With your lordship’s permission I may have found a thruster upgrade but it would require staying on Nar Shaddaa an extra two days.”

“Do it,” Jhonnen said. “We might need the boost. I’m about to close the deal with Rathari, once I’m finished feel encouraged to take some time off.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, my lord.”

“What would someone like Quinn even do on Nar Shaddaa?” Vette asked as the holo went dark. She wrinkled her nose playfully at Jhonnen.

“Maybe a lap dance? I’m not one hundred percent convinced he actually unwinds, but he’s a person so he’s probably got to or he’d explode.”

“Watching him explode could be fun,” Vette said. “And what are we going to do for two days on Nar Shaddaa?”

“Eat, shop, maybe take in a fight?” Jhonnen shrugged.

“Get a lap dance?”

“If you want a lap dance, Vette, I will pay for it.”

Vette laughed. “No thanks.”
They left Halidrell’s shop and took a taxi to Network Access. Network Access served as the communications hub of Nar Shaddaa as well as some luxury housing. Vette stuck close to Jhonnen as they made their way up to where they were supposed to be “dueling” Rathari.

Jhonnen kept expecting assassins but they made it to and then up the elevator without issue.

Once upstairs they had to fight their way through Rathari’s troops. Jhonnen kept as much of the attention on himself as possible, trusting Vette to pick people off with her blasters. Fortunately, attracting attention when you were blood red and wielding a pair of angry looking lightsabers wasn’t difficult.

Rathari was a human male in a hood and Jhonnen could make out cybernetic enhancements below his eyes. He towered over the smaller male Jhonnen guessed was probably Agent Dellocon.

“Ah, you showed,” said Rathari, sounding pleased about it. “You lack your master’s caution. I applaud that.” He turned to the man at his side. “Dellocon. Baras’s lackey is here. So say your piece and do it before I kill this would-be assassin.”

“Baras is insane and paranoid,” snapped Dellocon. Jhonnen nodded his agreement. “I was a faithful servant, and my cover was intact! Did he expect me to accept being murdered for reassurance? Just wait for death?”

“At least the wait’ll be over in a minute. I hate waiting for things.” Jhonnen said dryly.

Dellocon snorted. “Lord Rathari protects me now, and all of Baras’s secrets will be his.”

“In a hundred years,” preached Rathari. “When I am legendary within the Sith, your and Baras’s deaths at my hands will not even be a footnote. However, I would never lower myself to duel a mere apprentice such as you. You haven’t earned the honor.”

“See what I mean,” Jhonnen said, turning his attention to Vette. “It’s just something they shout about.”

Rathari snapped and about six well-armed masked bodies moved to encircle Jhonnen and Vette. “These men are my elite guard,” Rathari explained. “Trained to take on Sith. Half of them could kill you, but I don’t like to play favorites.”

“Muttonchops.” Jhonnen said flatly. Vette pushed a button on her holo to signal Commander Naughlen and his men.

They rappelled down and surrounded Rathari’s elite guard, making Jhonnen feel rather like the chicken at the middle of a murderous turducken.

“I see now,” Rathari said, drawing his lightsaber. “I’ve underestimated your resourcefulness.”

“I get that a lot.”

The fighting broke out, Rathari and Dellocon retreating to leave Jhonnen and Commander Naughlen to clean up Rathari’s elite guard.

Jhonnen took the opportunity in the chaos to leap at Rathari. The larger man blocked both of Jhonnen’s lightsabers and Force-shoved him backwards. Jhonnen slid on the balls of his feet and rushed back in, pressing the attack.

Dellocon fired at him but only for a moment before Vette forced him back into cover.
Rathari and Jhonnen traded blows back and forth, kicking and punching between screaming blows from their lightsabers until Jhonnen tripped the other Sith up and elbowed him in the spine to help him on his way to the ground.

“T’ yield,” Rathari shouted, rising up to his knees and eyeing the tip of Jhonnen’s lightsaber with distrust. Jhonnen hooked the lightsaber back on his belt. “Never have I witnessed such raw power.”

“I get that a lot too,” Jhonnen said with the softest edge of irritation.

“The day and the planet are yours, I freely pass the scepter.” Rathari reached out a hand and snapped Dellocon’s neck from a distance. “The threat Dellocon posed to you and your master has died with him. I hope in ingratiates me in some way.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.” Jhonnen said, at a bit of a loss.

“It’s clear to me now,” Rathari continued. “Someday you will rise above your master. It is you, not I, who will be Darth Baras’s end. Grant me mercy so I may live to see it. Honor me with some small hand in it.”

Jhonnen frowned. “You’re probably right about that. I’ll take the oath, should the time come when I have to strike against Baras, I expect to find you in my corner.”

“I shall wait with patience for your summons.” Rathari inclined his head. “I leave you to your business, my lord. Remember, I am at your disposal whenever you may seek to topple Baras.”

Vette and Jhonnen waited for Rathari to disappear before Vette spoke, “That was very Sith of you.”

Jhonnen snorted. “Let’s hope I don’t have to make a pattern of it. He turned his attention where Muttonchops was picking up one of his men. “Thank you for your assistance, gentlemen. If no one has any complaints, that concludes our business. Let’s leave separately.”

Muttonchops nodded and directed his men to leave.

“Back to the ship?” Vette asked. “Are we really stuck here for two more days?”

Jhonnen nodded. “Not enjoying yourself?”

“What’s to enjoy? It’s so dark and scummy, gives me the creeps. I just want to get back to the ship to grab some shut-eye.”

Jhonnen woke up early and curled around his knees on the bed. He’d dreamt of Panwa Muni, washing glasses in the back where no one could see him. Setting up chairs before the club was open. Vivex showing him a couple of tricks on the pole to build up his arms. He shuddered on his mattress, arms wrapped around himself to combat the deep-seated cold feeling that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature.

Vette had suggested that he go back, try to find some of his people.

He hung around the ship ‘til early evening, when Panwa Muni opened, and headed for the airlock.

“Want some company?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen gave her a wry smile he couldn’t feel. “Is this a genuine offer or are you avoiding the Captain?”
“Can’t it be both?”

Jhonnen conceded that. “I’m going to a strip club, Vette.”

“Somehow, I think I’ll survive.”

This time, Jhonnen’s smile was a little warmer and a little more genuine. He turned and headed into the cockpit where Quinn was checking the new thrusters’ integration on the ship’s computers. “Hey, Vette and I were thinking about hitting the nightlife, care to join us?”

Quinn looked up at him and shook his head. “No, my lord. I’ve never had any interest in the Nar Shaddaan ‘nightlife’ and I want to oversee the rest of this installation.”

“Suit yourself, comm me if you change your mind.”

“Of course, my lord.” Quinn saluted and then dropped his attention back to what he was doing.

Jhonnen met Vette at the airlock and they headed to the Red Light Sector together. Despite the years of distance, Jhonnen’s feet took him directly to Panwa Muni’s door.

“We’ll attract fewer looks if we go inside.” Vette hesitantly pushed his bicep to get his attention. “Come on, Jhonny, buy me a drink.”

Jhonnen gave her a small, grateful smile. “Keep that up Vette, and I’ll start to wonder if you’re afraid of me at all.”

“Should I be?”

He shook his head. “You? Never.”

Vette laughed. “You’re like the insane little brother I never had. Maybe I’ll keep you.” She pushed open the front door to the darkened club and Jhonnen followed after her.

They got a table near the back and Jhonnen ordered drinks for both of them. It wasn’t before long that they were joined by a beautiful and scantily clad Nautolan, gold clasped around her tentacles. Someone had noticed his lightsabers and they were sending over the best entertainment in the house to keep him happy.

Because unhappy Sith were expensive.

The dancer’s fake ‘fuck-me’ smile fell away as she took in his face. “Jhonnen?” she asked in wavery, watery voice.

“It’s me, Viv.” He gave her a threadbare smile, she hadn’t changed in seven years, not with the dim club lights hiding the wrinkles around her eyes. “This is my… my friend, Vette. We just thought we’d stop in for a drink.”

It was a lie and an obvious one, he couldn’t even smile as he said it. He was thirteen again, asking her where his mother was and knowing that the answer was ‘busy’.

Vivex watched him warily, and then her shoulders relaxed and she opened her arms. Jhonnen stood and accepted the first hug he’d had in seven years, letting his temple rest against her bare clavicle.

“It’s good to see you, Kid,” she said in a watery voice, holding him tightly. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”
“It’s the jewelry,” Jhonnen pressed his face to her neck. “I tried to get away without it, but the old man insisted.”

“You look good,” she told him, pulling away. “Drinks on the house for my nephew and his pretty friend.”

“Thanks,” Vette said, clearly uncomfortable.

Jhonnen settled back to sitting and swiped at the moisture in his eyes.

“Who’s she?” Vette asked as Vivex walked away.

“My mom’s best friend.” Jhonnen looked at the table. “All that’s left of my mom, really. This was… this was a good idea. Thanks Vette.”
Chapter Summary

Jhonnen and Vette explore Tatooine and admit some small degree of fondness.

Jhonnen’s adventures in getting Nomen Karr to stop tracking his ship had resulted in a holocall with the Jedi Master himself. Insofar as he could tell, all this business between Karr and Baras was personal. Possibly *personal* personal. Though he admittedly had a hard time picturing *anyone* wanting to shack up with Baras even before he was a Darth and possibly before he was ‘Baras’.

In any event, he and Karr’s padawan were stuck in the middle of this fucking mess. Which felt unfair to both of them and kindled the beginnings of a soft spot for her in his breast. He needed to keep from feeling sympathetic to her because Baras was probably going to order him to murder her in the face.

But maybe there was another way out of this. If he could *talk* to her, they could put their heads together and think of something.

Maybe.

Returning to the ship he let Quinn get back to work and went to the engine room to find Vette. Vette looked up when he entered the room and her expression clouded with a question.

“What’s on your mind?” Jhonnen asked.

“Been thinking. What does family mean to you? I mean does it have to be the people you’re actually related to?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “Ideally, family should be decided upon. Blood matters a little bit, I can’t make Vitreous un-related to me, but that doesn’t discount the role Vivex played in raising me. The people closest to you become family, whether it’s a good idea or not.”

“Cute. I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

Jhonnen had meant it as one so this was fine.

“When I was working for Nok Drayen, doing the pirate thief thing, he had a daughter my age. Risha.” Vette frowned again, dropping her eyes away. “It wasn’t like Nok was super sweet to her or anything. But he’d call her princess and I wished I was her.”

“You two get along or was there a lot of butting heads?” Jhonnen asked.

“We got along great. Risha was smart and strong, she knew how to do everything around the ship and I went everywhere with her. Suddenly I had a sister again. For years it was Risha and me against the galaxy and anyone who gave us grief.”

Unbidden, Jhonnen’s thoughts returned to Kira. By the end of it he’d had too much of a crush on her to call her his sister, but he could relate to the camaraderie. Going everywhere together, being almost everything to one another.
“Sounds like a wonderful time,” he said to Vette, pulling free of his own thoughts.

She nodded and looked down at the floor. “Eventually Nok hatched some secret plan that I couldn’t be part of. One that apparently got them both killed.” Her eyes moved back to Jhonnen. “But for a while there, I really was happy.” She shook her head. “Ugh. Enough of that. I’m going to go make caf.”

He popped back into the cockpit where Quinn was working and gave the man a surprised look when Quinn got up from his chair. “Permission to speak freely, my lord.”

“You’re always encouraged to speak your mind, Quinn.” Jhonnen leaned against the wall, grateful for something to take his mind off the thoughts Vette had dredged up by accident.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Quinn said. He folded his hands behind his back and stood at his full height, nearly a foot taller than Jhonnen himself. “There’s a reason I was languishing on Balmorra before you arrived. A decade ago, I served under Moff Broysc at the Battle of Druckenwell.”

Jhonnen had largely ignored his father’s teachings about the galactic war, but unless Quinn had been a very young officer, it did paint the difference in their ages in a starker light. Given as Quinn would have probably been about Jhonnen’s age during Druckenwell, and that was a decade ago.

“Moff Broysc made a critical oversight that brought the fleet to the brink of complete defeat. I ignored his order and turned the tide to victory.”

“Well done,” Jhonnen praised. “That can’t have been easy.”

“It was not, my lord. Broysc took credit for the reversal, which is fine, but then he court-martialed me.”

Jhonnen was under the impression that a court-martial was the end of one’s military career, but, granted, he’d paid almost zero attention to how the Imperials functioned outside their connection to the Sith.

“Darth Baras assigned me to Balmorra or my career would have been over,” Quinn said. “Moff Broysc has blocked every transfer and promotion I’ve been up for since.”

Not every, Jhonnen thought. Baras had gotten him off Balmorra and into a captaincy. And he’d done it with very little effort. However, that meant that Baras had saved Quinn’s career and Quinn seemed to be mostly his career. Which meant that Baras owned Quinn.

“The Moff is an idiot,” he said flatly.

Quinn smiled, just a little bit. “I could say more about him, but my point is made. I serve you now, I have no regrets.”

He served Baras, and probably he served Baras on a lie.

“Anything else you wanted to talk about while I’m here, Quinn?” Jhonnen asked, up for just shooting the shit or anything really. Something to distract from thoughts of Kira and what family really meant.

“Actually, yes, my lord. I have been working on something in my spare time. You may be interested.”

“Of course,” Jhonnen said. “This little project the reason you declined joining Vette and I for
drinks?”

“In part, my lord. In truth I don’t care for Nar Shaddaa and was happier remaining behind on the ship.”

“Fair enough, so what do you have?”

“Years ago, I was zeroing in on a notorious SIS agent called Voloren when Moff Broysc recalled me to the Battle of Druckenwell. I had the spy cornered. I briefed Broysc so that he could send someone else to take Voloren out. He ignored the opportunity.”

“Because he’s an idiot,” Jhonnen said flatly.

“That’s not for me to determine,” said Quinn, pointedly not disagreeing. “I will say this though. Since then, Voloren has gone on to wreak havoc against the Empire. One missed opportunity has led to a decade of unnecessary losses. I know Voloren’s signature, and by tracking his accomplishments, I’ve picked up his scent.”

“If you’re asking for permission to hunt him down, you have it,” Jhonnen said with a small shrug. “Let’s not repeat any of Broysc’s mistakes.”

“I’ll keep you abreast of my progress.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Baras was set on killing Nomen Karr’s padawan, but Jhonnen wasn’t certain it was necessary. He lay on his overly-plush mattress in the late hours, staring up at the ceiling and wishing he and Vette had been able to swap rooms. Still, at least it gave him time to think. He’d planted a sliver of doubt in Baras, doubt that death was necessary and that instead, Karr’s padawan could be turned to darkness. If it was true, he wouldn’t have to kill her at all.

And if she could be convinced to pretend, just long enough to get herself to safety… Jhonnen might get out of this without innocent blood on his red hands.

He had to talk to her for any of this to work anyway. So for now, following Baras’s plan was the only thing to do.

They were headed to Tatooine. Jhonnen had never been but he’d listened to enough people and read enough to know that it was an inhospitable desert world. So he, and whomever he took with him, would need long sleeves and head-coverings. Preferably in white. Sith fashion aesthetics must kill more people on Tatooine than anything else.

He dozed for an hour here and there and left his room to make caf after hearing the fresher turn off from Quinn’s shower. There was caf waiting for him and a sparkling clean captain with his hair still slightly wet.

“I wasn’t expecting you at this hour, my lord.”

“We should be hitting Tatooine’s orbit shortly,” Jhonnen yawned. “Baras never sleeps and will want to brief me as soon as we land.”

A much more convenient truth than “your presence makes it so I can’t sleep in the room I’d actually sleep in.”
Sure enough, they broke into Tatooine’s orbit when Jhonnen was half-through with his caf. He set the mug aside and headed to the holoterminal to take Baras’s call.

“Couldn’t sleep, my apprentice?” asked Baras, ever sniffing for weakness.

“Didn’t want to keep you waiting,” Jhonnen lied.

Baras let it go. “I have gleaned much since our interrogation of the Republic agent here on Dromund Kaas. I am certain Nomen Karr brought his gifted padawan to Tatooine to train with a legendary Master named Yonlach. Years ago, I urged the Dark Council to hunt down and destroy this Jedi. They refused, and Yonlach went into hiding on Tatooine.”

“So he’s who I’m here for, then?” Jhonnen asked, lifting his brow with the question.

“Yes. Yonlach is the one who brought the padawan’s powers into expression. Now, they share a special bond. Find him and destroy him.”

“Why?” Jhonnen asked, the early morning making him petulant.

“Nomen Karr shelters his prize, so we will draw her out by destroying everything she loves,” Baras explained. “My servant Sharack Breev will guide you. She’s eccentric, an acquired taste, but give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“I can do that.”

“That is all,” Baras said, and the holo went dark.

Jhonnen went to find Vette in the engine room. He knocked on the wall to wake her up and waited a few minutes.

“I know you don’t want to wander around a giant sandbox, but I’d prefer your company for this one.”

Vette rubbed one of her eyes and nodded, yawning as she did. “Caf first?”

“Quinn made a whole pot. We’ve got a little bit of time before we land.”

“Hooray,” muttered Vette without enthusiasm.

Half an hour later, Jhonnen and Vette left The Sanguine Tide and met Sharack in the hangar. She was a human female (Jhonnen was shocked) with white hair that should have marked her as many years older than she actually was. She bowed low to Jhonnen and then, surprisingly, offered a smaller nod to Vette.

Vette blinked at her in surprise but didn’t comment beyond that.

“The harsh sands of Tatooine welcome you,” Sharack said formally. “I am Sharack Breev. Our lord and master Darth Baras bid me to impart my knowledge of this planet and help you track down the Jedi Master Yonlach.”

Eccentric. Right. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Jhonnen and this is Vette.”

“Hi,” Vette gave a small wave.

“I will be your compass,” Sharack said seriously. “You will find Master Yonlach by tracing the path the Padawan and her master took. I can tell you where they started. I followed them to the
forbidden lair of the ancient sand demon, a terrible beast. The padawan left her weapons and entered alone. Impossibly, she returned unscathed.

“The Force is a powerful tool, she wasn’t really unarmed, was she?”

“I have witnessed the power of the Force, but this goes beyond wonder. The sand demon is the fiercest creature on this planet. You don’t just walk into its lair and return without a scratch. I investigated further. The beast was there, also undamaged—and what’s most perplexing, it’s skin was glistening.”

“It was suddenly shiny? Glistening how?” Acquired taste was probably correct. Not that she was out of place amidst everyone else in Jhonnen’s life who felt the need to be either overly serious or overly cryptic.

“As though covered in the layer of living gel one is born into the world covered in.”

“Ew,” Vette volunteered.

“What happened in that cave is a mystery, as is where the padawan and her master went afterwards,” Sharack continued unbothered. “There is one man on Tatooine who might be able to explain. Izzeebowe Jeef. He’s as old as the sand. Part madman, part soothsayer.”

Maybe everyone on this planet was crazy. They’re certainly have to be crazy to live there.

“I should probably talk to him,” Jhonnen said. “After Vette and I purchase new clothes and supplies.”

“It will not be easy to speak with Jeef. The small farming settlement where he lives has been overrun by Exchange thugs. The Exchange hates the Empire for running them out of Mos Ila. They will allow me to pass, but they’ll attack you on sight.”

“I’m red sith,” Jhonnen said with a small smile. “I’m used to it. But thanks for the head’s up.”

Sharack left to prepare Jeef for their arrival and Vette and Jhonnen hit the market. They purchased food and water, enough for a week, though Jhonnen intended to be done as quickly as possible. He changed into a long sleeved white tunic made of several layers of thin fabric and a hat with a neck drape and waited for Vette.

She emerged in a similar getup, minus the hat. The blue skin of her belly was almost visible through the thin white cloth. Jhonnen made a point not to look.

“Sunburnt lekku are no fun,” she told him. “But the guy was able to sell me a cream that should avert the worst of it.

“We’ll stick to shadows as best we can,” Jhonnen promised.

They left Mos Ila and headed out of town to the farming settlement Sharack had indicated. Sure enough, the exchange thugs fired on Jhonnen as soon as he got close, but they were gangsters and none of them trained to combat sith.

Jhonnen simply scared most of them off and headed inside with Vette.

Izzeebowe was more or less what Jhonnen had expected from a hermity madman, there was wisdom in what he said, but you had to get through how he said it.
The padawan had performed a ritual called the Demon’s Blood, in which she had bathed in the blood of the sand demon and entered the sand people’s village nearby. There she was given some key to the path of enlightenment.

Jhonnen was meant to perform this same ritual, and follow her trail.

It was a long ride to the sand demon’s lair.

“We go the best places,” Vette complained as they stopped in the limited shade of one craggy cliff-face.

“Do you want a hand with that?” Jhonnen asked as she slathered cream all over her lekku.
“Because you don’t want to miss a spot.”

Vette glared at him and then relented. “Yeah, fine.”

“I’ll be quick.” Jhonnen scooped out a goodly amount of the cream and rubbed it into one lekku and then the other, being a gentle as he could. His hands were coarse from fighting and practicing to fight, but there was nothing he could do about that. Vette’s lekku glinted in the sun when he’d finished.

“The sand demon’s cave should be just through there,” Jhonnen pointed. “And it’s starting to get dark.”

“Great!” Vette complained.

He couldn’t really disagree.

The sand demon’s lair was full of wraids, beasts who were little more than snakeheads on two muscular arms and itty bitty back legs. They fell before Jhonnen’s lightsaber and he used the glow to guide them deeper into the cave.

Vette stuck close to his side as they went, until they found the sand demon in the center of the room. “At least it’s cooler in here,” she pointed out with a small smile on her mouth.

Jhonnen smiled despite the seriousness of their task.

The sand demon towered in the center on the room on bony legs. It’s spiky carapace glinted in the low light from the bioluminescent fungus.

Vette’s hand touched his arm, two fingers pressing against the inside of his elbow before they were gone like nothing had happened. “Uh, can we talk for a second,” she whispered. “I really don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“We can worry about feeling good later,” Jhonnen said. “That didn’t come out right.”

Vette snorted and rolled her eyes. “We’re about to face a monster that can swallow us whole, Jhonnen.”

“I said it didn’t come out right.”

“Anyway, I’m thinking, if the Jedi performed the Demon Blood ritual without a fight, there must be a way we can too. As a favor to me, could we please get through this without mixing it up with the sand demon?”
“I’ll try,” Jhonnen promised, unigniting his lightsaber and hooking it back to his belt. “But stay behind me just in case.”

The sand demon growled.

“Shit. It’s caught a whiff of us.” Vette took a step back. “I’m ready to back you up if it goes badly.”

“That is what I pay your for,” Jhonnen said. He gave her a smile to show it was in good fun, and then approached the sand demon.

The beast howled, furious.

Jhonnen planted his feet. “You cannot scare me, monster. You cannot move me.”

Confused, the sand demon stopped thrashing, lowering its face nearer to Jhonnen’s. Jhonnen withstood both its gaze and its breath, holding its gaze.

The sand demon cowered.

Jhonnen took a breath and focused. “I’m okay. You’re okay. There is a kind of serenity here. Nobody needs to eat anybody else.”

The sand demon nodded and slowly lowered itself to the ground, sleeping. Jhonnen took a small step forward to look at it.

“Well that… wait… what’s it doing?” Vette asked.

The sand demon’s carapace cracked and began to ooze a foul smelling liquid. Vette gagged and Jhonnen covered his nose, taking an instinctive step back.

“Gross! The thing went to sleep and shed its skin. It’s oozing blood and… nastiness all over the place. And this smell! Gag! We’re gonna stink for days. What if it never wears off?”

“Quinn abandons us both or staples his nostrils shut?” Jhonnen asked with a shrug. “It’ll wear off.”

“I sure hope you’re right. I take a lot of pride in my hygiene.”

Jhonnen chuckled. “You certainly take a long time in the fresher. You and Quinn both, I’m starting to wonder if I’m missing something.”

“How do you know how long Quinn takes in the fresher, he’s always the first one up.”

“I barely sleep some nights,” Jhonnen admitted. “Come on, let’s go find the sand people village and get our path to enlightenment.”

“Shouldn’t you bathe in the blood, my lord?” Vette challenged.

“If they can’t smell it they’re already dead.” Jhonnen said, leaving the cave. They emerged beneath starlight and shivered in the cold. Vette wrapped her arms around herself. “Let’s get inside somewhere quick.”

They entered the cave where the sand people had set up shop and Jhonnen tensed for a fight. No fight was forthcoming. In fact, the further into the cave he and Vette went the faster the sand people trickled out around them. Every one of them running for their lives the minute they saw, or rather smelled, the duo.
The village emptied and Jhonnen and Vette headed into the largest tent at the back of the cave where there was still a fire burning.

Sharack arrived shortly after. “I trailed and observed your descent here. I could not believe my eyes. The sand people all ran from you. What transpired inside the sand demon cave that makes this so?”

“You can smell it, can’t you?” Jhonnen asked. “Vette and I stink to Corellia and back. I tamed the sand demon and it leaked on us.” He couldn’t properly call what had happened bleeding.

“Remarkable,” said Sharack. “You have bathed in the demon’s essence. The Jedi padawan must have done the same. Now, Izzeebowe said that this is where your path will be illuminated, but there doesn’t seem to be anything here… wait.” She directed Jhonnen’s gaze to the front of the tent where a trembling sand person was approaching. “Be on your guard, offworlder.”

Jhonnen looked at the sand person and sensed fear and reverence. The sand person bowed low and extended a map with trembling hands. Jhonnen bowed before he took it, watching the sand person bolt the minute the parchment was in his grasp.

It was probably a map but Jhonnen, who had no context for it, might as well have been looking at random scribbles. He handed it to Sharack who declared that it was, in fact, a map, and that it pointed to a door that didn’t exist.

“We’ll look for it in the morning, but it’s cold out there and getting colder.”

“We should make camp here. Tomorrow, head deeper into the desert to find the Desert’s Wound Ravine, I will follow stealthed.”

Jhonnen nodded.

Sharack left to do… something, Jhonnen didn’t ask.

“I was not expecting freezing,” Vette said, shivering before she extended her hands to the fire pit.

“Scorching days and freezing nights. This really is the worst planet,” Jhonnen agreed. He kicked some of the softer sand people’s provisions into something vaguely bed shaped. “You sleep first,” he gestured to the pile. “I’ll keep watch for a bit. Sharack might be back or she might not. I didn’t ask and I’m not sure if I care.”

“If I suggest something way out of line do you promise not to electrocute me?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m not going to electrocute you, Vette. You’re the nearest thing I have to a friend anymore.”

“Well, in the name of friendship and neither of us freezing to death. Come lay down next to me.”

Jhonnen obeyed. He stopped breathing when Vette set her cheek on his clavicle.

“Relax,” she told him.

“You relax,” he muttered. “I can feel your nervousness from here.” He said, like he wasn’t half-underneath her.

“It’s been awhile since I slept next to somebody. It’s fine.”

Jhonnen blinked back the moisture and focused on breathing again. It was warmer this way,
certainly. Vette curled over him, holding him tight. Jhonnen kept a lightsaber under his palm and his eyes on the cave entrance, waiting for trouble.

His thoughts touched on Kira before he could stop them, snuggled sitting upright on the couch that was his bed. His head on her shoulder. Exhausted from a chase.

Jhonnen took a deep breath, and forced himself to remain stone still to keep from making Vette uncomfortable. She didn’t seem like she was big on physical affection.

“We really do stink,” Vette murmured.

He smiled and slowly wrapped his arm around her, tilting his head so his cheek rested against the top of her head. Her lekku twitched happily and he smiled. “We’ll wash it off when we get a chance.” She shifted against him and Jhonnen sighed, now was as good a time as ever. “You should know, I understand a little lekku. Not a lot, but… enough.”

Vette nodded dragging her cheek against his chest. “I barely understand any Rylothian. I never thought much about being a twi’lek when I was younger.”

“Really?”

“Even on Ryloth there were lots of other types of people. As far as I could tell people like me were just the ones who made the best slaves. Wasn’t much to be proud of, you know?”

Jhonnen nodded. “I was forced to think about being sith. Mom was considered exotic at Panwa Muni, my best friend called me Red.”

“One more thing we’ve sort of got in common then, struggling with identity. When I left Nok Drayen’s gang I joined up with a group of twi’lek artifact hunters. They were all young too, full of fire and twi’lek pride. Out trying to recover our heritage.”

Jhonnen laughed a little. “I can see the appeal of passionate, fiery treasure hunters. Almost romantic to think about.”

Vette snorted. “You should have met them. There was this girl they called Taunt, she was beautiful. Everyone loved her.”

“Did you love her?” Jhonnen asked.

Vette laughed. “Not like the guys did, that’s for sure. I mean, I thought about it once or twice, but it wasn’t before long that she was like my big sister.”

“Sounds like you all got close.”

“There was this rich duros scumball—Cada Bliss. Obsessed with Twi’lek women, artifacts, clothes—anything. We took him for everything he was worth.”

Jhonnen shifted on the makeshift bedding and pulled Vette a little closer, using her like a twi’lek blanket. “Did you have to rescue people as well?”

“Yeah, and some of them weren’t exactly in great shape. Wasn’t much better than Korriban and they’d been there awhile.” Vette cleared her throat to dispel the atmosphere that sentence had left. “Anyway, we were flying high. Did a couple more jobs together. Then came Korriban. And I guess you know how that ended.”
“I go back and forth on it.” Jhonnen admitted. “Because on the one hand I wish you’d never been caught, but on the other hand if you hadn’t been there, it may well be Vemrin exploring Tatooine right now.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“You really, literally, saved my life that day.”

“Well, you’re welcome. I’m glad I did.”

The door in the ravine lead to an oasis. He looked at Vette and figured that her thoughts were touching on the same ‘can we wash this hell stink off’ thoughts that were spinning through his head.

Vette cocked her head to the side. “This is either a mirage or a trap set by a nasty underwater monster. Or both.”

Jhonnen snorted a laugh. “Want me to go first then?”

“Yes,” Vette nodded.

“Promise you won’t peek.” He managed to keep a straight face for about two seconds before a smile broke over his mouth.

Vette snorted and rolled her eyes. “Great. Of all the Sith lords out there, I got the one who thinks he’s funny.”

“I am funny,” Jhonnen corrected. He was just out of practice. He stripped down to his underthings and waded into the water, and then stopped. In the middle on the oasis, standing on the water, was Jhonnen. But not Jhonnen as he knew himself. The spectre’s lip curled in a cruel sneer.

“Take a good long look, lightweight,” said the reflection. “I am the embodiment of your true potential. I am the bane of Lord Vitreous. I am what would happen if you had the guts to follow your darkness just a little further.”

“Hey Vette,” Jhonnen said without breaking eye-contact with his reflection. “You never told me I was a looker.”

“Cut your shit, Jhonnen,” snapped the reflection. “Our looks are the least of your worries. Cut mercy from your heart or it will eat away at you when you face your enemy. Embrace the full meaning of the dark side of the Force, or you will fail. You are already Baras’s puppet. You are already a known liability. He’ll kill you before you get your shot if you don’t cut it out.”

“Right, I’m going to take advice from a guy who couldn’t bother to be properly opaque.” Jhonnen’s hands extended out and summoned his lightsabers. “If I let them break me they’ve won anyway.”

“You are Sith, Jhonnen. You walk among Sith. They will see your light and they will snuff it out.”

“Nobody’s noticed yet.”

“That’s because you’re a nobody. The minute you gain any power, all eyes will be on you. What about your plans to tame this padawan? A master of the dark side could turn her, way less messy than having you both attempt a deception. Less messy that having to kill her. You could kill Baras
and claim everything he has.”

“I won’t let you break me and I’m not going to break her,” Jhonnen argued.

“Idiot,” scoffed his reflection, a lightsaber manifesting in his hand. “One day you’ll crack and if you don’t crack on your own terms you will destroy everything you love.”

Jhonnen brought his lightsaber up to block the blow from the reflection, amazed to find his opponent was solid.

Jhonnen threw himself backwards, onto dry land where he wasn’t at so much of a disadvantage.

The reflection went to knee him in the face but Jhonnen dodged. He struck out and was caught in the chest with lightning. They battled across the oasis until one Jhonnen had the other on his knees.

The Jhonnen on his knees glowed white and flowed up through Jhonnen’s lightsaber and into his skin.

“You’ve won,” said Jhonnen’s voice, echoing around the oasis. “Our essence has been purified. In the clarity of this communion… a vision of our destiny on Tatooine appears.”

Jhonnen knelt and saw a little house, way out in the desert, reachable only by speeder and hairy even then.

“Can you see it too?” asked the voice. “An encampment hidden in the farthest reaches of the desert, past a rock formation called the Forbidden Pass. This is where the padawan went, where her powers expressed.”

Jhonnen nodded and stood up. He popped his back and looked at Vette.

“Sorry I wasn’t more help, I tried and my blaster bolts went right through that asshole.”

“Yeah, it was a me thing. It’s fine.” Jhonnen looked up at the sound of footsteps and gave Sharack a smile.

“I cannot believe what I just witnessed,” Sharack said, staring at Jhonnen and then out at the oasis. “Did… did you just tell yourself to venture beyond the Forbidden Pass.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said slowly. “Which, and admittedly I’m new here, sounds bad.”

“The roughest portion of the desert if beyond the Forbidden Pass. Your Empire has a base camp there, I will give you the location.”

“Much appreciated. First things first, now that we’ve proven Vette’s theory about the water being a trap, I want to wash this sand demon essence off.”

“Same,” Vette agreed. “You go first.”

Jhonnen laughed. “Worried you’ll have your own little battle over your convictions?”

“Pretty sure that was a Force thing.”

Jhonnen nodded. “It was.”

Vette shrugged. “Yeah, not particularly worried about it in that case.”
Master Yonlach lived in quite possibly the most depressing hut Jhonnen had ever seen. The hut itself wasn’t too bad, but there was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see in every direction and that was depressing.

Jhonnen and Vette let themselves into the small building with their weapons holstered but easy enough to get to.

“Master Yonlach,” said the taller and younger of the two jedi waiting for them. “The Sith you’ve been tracking is upon us. Retreat to safety. I will take the intruder on!”

Jhonnen raised his brow at the man.

“No, Yul-li, control your feelings. Stand at my side. I will face this trespasser.” Yonlach came around the desk and stood peaceably two feet from Jhonnen. “Come no farther, Sith. I have been aware of your pilgrimage here. You are a fascinating and contradictory example of your order.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen said, eyeing Yul-li’s ignited lightsaber from the corner of his eye. If an attack happened, that was the direction it was coming from.

“I know why you’ve come,” continued Yonlach. “Master Nomen Karr’s padawan threatens you somehow. You seek to flush her into the open and silence her.”

“Well you’re half right. I’m definitely trying to flush her into the open but I don’t intend to kill her.”

“Don’t insult me, child.”

“Well now who’s being insulting.”

Yonlach frowned more deeply. “You are Sith. If you are hunting her there can only be one end in your mind. She came to me for guidance, and the bond we struck was the most profound of my life. We are psychically linked, she and I, and I have already warned her about you. She will not fall for your manipulations.”

“You could save everyone a lot of time and trouble if you told her I just want to talk.” Jhonnen sighed after he said it. Reasoning with Jedi was like playing dejarik with a wookie. At the end of the day one of you was hollering incoherently and the other was missing at least one limb. Still, he had to try.

“I will not fall for your manipulations either.”

Jhonnen groaned.

“You showed restraint and reason on your journey here. Your choices reflect conscientiousness I’ve never witnessed in Sith.”

“You should get out more,” Jhonnen said with a shrug.

“The disparity in our capabilities is equal to the disparity in our age. You cannot win. Turn away now.”

“That’s not really an option.” Jhonnen clasp his lightsabers in either hand. “But honestly, I’m just trying to talk to her.”

To convince her to go along with this mad plan long enough to get her someplace safe while Baras
and Nomen Karr destroyed one another.

“In me you face a full Jedi master,” Yonlach stated clearly. “And Yul-li has greater command of lightsaber combat than any Jedi Knight I’ve trained.”

Vette cleared her throat. “Uh, color me nervous. Have we ever faced a full-fledged card carrying Jedi master before?”

“I don’t think they carry cards.” Jhonnen shrugged, trying to make light. “But you’ve taken out worse.”

Yonlach reached out and twisted his hand. “Your compatriot’s query is moot, as you will be facing us on your own.”

Vette crumpled. Jhonnen could still feel her life force, but his eyes blazed. He leapt forward, darting past Yul-li to the master himself. Yonlach blocked but Jhonnen used his block to bring both legs up to kick at Yul-li. He twisted, landing on the ground and blocking attacks from both sides. Yonlach threw him into a wall and he rolled to the side before Yul’li could get a killing blow in.

He had to end this quickly, before one of the jedi saw the easy kill lying there on the floor. Before she got trampled. Jhonnen flipped over Yul-li and drove his lightsaber through the taller man’s shoulder and then kicked him onto Yonlach. Yonlach unignited his lightsaber to keep from running Yul-li through.

“Stop!” Yun-li shouted, staying Yonlach’s hand with the force, not enough to really stop a master but enough to make his objections known. “Hold you weapon, Sith, I beg you!”

Jhonnen looked to make sure that Yun-li didn’t have Vette, and moved to position himself between her and the jedi.

“Yul-li, stay your tongue,” order Yonlach.

“No, she is just a padawan,” Yun-li protested. “You are a great Master! I must bargain for your life.”

“I’m listening.” Jhonnen said flatly. He felt for Vette through the force and found that she was still there, stunned but unharmed. He kept his thoughts to himself, checking she was unharmed but not reaching for her consciousness.

“Sith, I’ll tell you everything I know, if you spare Master Yonlach.”

“Deal.” Jhonnen exhaled some of the hate in his lungs and refocused on the task at hand.

“Her name is Jaesa Willsaam and Nomen Karr has taken her to—”

“Yul-li,” said Yonlach in an empty voice. “You have no recollection of the padawan this Sith seeks.”

Yul-li’s eyes were vacant. “I have no recollection of the padawan this Sith seeks.”

“Now sleep.”

Yul-li crumpled on the floor, his injured arm beneath him at an angle that can’t have been comfortable.

One person yelling incoherently, one person almost missing a limb, the usual fare for arguing with
Yonlach looked at Jhonnen and immediately defended himself. “I do not relish wiping Yul-li’s mind like that. But his feelings for me got the better of him.”

“Are you supposed to avoid having feelings?”

“And you’ve just seen why.” Yonlach cleared his throat. “Jaesa is special, her power unprecedented. If untouched by the likes of you, she has the potential to lead the Jedi to greatness.”

“For the last fucking time, old man. I am not trying to kill her,” Jhonnen snapped. Irritated by the Jedi assuming his intentions and worried for Vette who still hadn’t moved. “Take the sand out of your ears and your vagina and listen for once.”

“I know your kind, Sith. You twist the truth and manipulate weakness. I must err on the side of caution. You know Jaesa’s name, but that is all you’ll get here. So, you may as well kill me.”

“If the pretty twi’lek girl doesn’t stand up when I check on her, you can bet your ass that that’s what’s going to happen.” Jhonnen snarled. “But otherwise I didn’t come here to kill you either. I just want to talk to her.”

Yonlach blinked at him. “Because of the link we share, Jaesa knows what transpired here. Your message has been received. She will do with it what she will.”

“Thank you,” Jhonnen huffed, putting away his lightsabers. “I leave you to deal with what you did to your buddy.”

“I do… feel the shame of my actions,” Yonlach said in a hesitant, halting tongue. “They will be difficult to live with.”

“Them’s the brakes.” Jhonnen turned around and looked down at Vette.

She blinked.

He offered a hand and slowly, shakily, her fingers alighted in his palm and she allowed him to pull her to her feet.

“You put on quite a show,” Vette complimented. “I knew you were good but…”

“I live to impress,” Jhonnen replied with a low bow. He wasn’t about to admit that the adrenaline fueling him had all been her fault. He wasn’t sure how she would take it. “You have your fill of desert?”

Vette nodded. “Sharack said she’d be at the ship. She thought we were done for. Can’t wait to see the look on her face.”

“We’d better hurry then, before she gives up hope and Quinn takes off without us.”

“Comm Quinn right now,” Vette insisted. “I don’t want to risk that.

Back aboard The Sanguine Tide, Jhonnen took one of the longer showers of his lifetime, washing away the remaining stink from the sand demon essence that had covered him and Vette. It gave him time to think beneath the spray. He’d argued with his inner darkness and won. He had beaten a jedi knight and a jedi master at the same time. He was only improving his combat abilities.
The disheartening part was that he’d been trying to reason with them when it’d happened. He knew he had a dishonest face, but Jedi were supposed to lean towards non-violent solutions, weren’t they?

Then again, they were trying to genocide his species.

A paradox.

Jhonnen turned the steam off and dressed, emerging clean from the refresher.

He headed to the holoterminal and called Baras, wanting to put Tatooine in the rearview, hopefully permanently.

Baras appeared in the holoterminal.

“You have done admirably, apprentice,” praised the holo. “Your time on Tatooine was well spent. Nomen Karr’s padawan, Jaesa Willsaam, no longer enjoys anonymity. I am very pleased.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jhonnen said, hoping to get the call over with so he could get some sleep.

“That was only the beginning,” Baras said. “Your handling of Master Yonlach has sent our enemies a clear message.”

Jhonnen felt a flicker of worry. He’d left the old man alive. He was pretty sure Baras would have an unfavorable opinion about that. “Nomen Karr and Jaesa Willsaam now know they cannot hide. It gnaws at the Master and will bring his prized padawan to her knees.”

“It should be interesting in any event,” Jhonnen said, maintaining as neutral an expression as he could.

“Only Alderaan remains. Jaesa Willsaam’s homeworld. Go there immediately, I will contact you when you arrive.”

Jhonnen spent a moment staring at the darkened holo. How much of Jhonnen’s actual intentions did the dark lord suspect? How aware of Jhonnen’s methods was he? Quinn no doubt kept him updated, but Quinn didn’t know most of what Jhonnen got up to. Quinn mostly stayed with the ship.

So what did Baras know and how was he finding it out?

Finally thinking like a Sith, are you? Jhonnen thought derisively, turning from the holo to head to the cockpit. He gave Quinn a small smile when the Captain turned to acknowledge him and waved his hand to discourage Quinn from getting up to bow. “How soon can we be at Alderaan?”

“Day after tomorrow, my lord. Shall I lay in the course?”

“Please.” Jhonnen stretched. “Do you ever get bored, being left behind?”

Quinn looked at him. “It’s not my place to—”

“That wasn’t the question, Quinn. Do you ever get bored.”

“Occasionally, my lord. But if this is where I can best serve, then this is where I will serve.”

Jhonnen smiled and shook his head. “I’ll figure you out eventually, Quinn.” He yawned. “Just, maybe not tonight.”
Balancing Act

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen takes Quinn to Alderaan and is forced to play the role of a Sith Apprentice more closely than ever.

Alderaan was beautiful. The elegant snow-frosted peaks and valleys were also cold, and this was the more pressing issue in Jhonnen’s eyes. He and Quinn took a speeder to House Thul, Jhonnen listening as Quinn explained the political situation in his ear as they traveled.

Having Quinn explain things directly into his ear was distracting and probably illegal. Jhonnen focused on driving, absorbing very little of what Quinn was telling him about the political situation. The Thuls and the Organas were at war. Someone had usurped the throne. The Empire was supporting the Organas. No, that was wrong. They were supporting the Thuls, who had not usurped the throne but taking the throne was why they were at war with the Organas who didn’t have it.

He parked the speeder outside of the building Quinn indicated with more information than he’d left the ship with and with less understanding of how it all fit together.

He’d figure it out.

Duke Kendoh was a short weasley man with muttonchops that bled into a thick mustache but left the chin bare. He was flanked by a tall and broad Sith who folded his arms casually over his chest when Jhonnen entered the room. Jhonnen waited until Kendoh was off the holo to speak.

“Afternoon, Darth Baras sent me.”

Kendoh turned around and glared at him. “What…? You’re not on my schedule. I don’t appreciate being interrupted.” He put his hands on his hips. “Baras isn’t even on my radar, Sith. I have a war to wage and personal ambitions to achieve here.”

“I would put Baras on the radar before someone kills you,” Jhonnen said lightly, his eyes flicking to the Sith bodyguard. He could probably take him if it came to a fight.

“A threat?” Kendoh said, unimpressed. “You see this Sith I have attending me? Your corpse will be my message to your master.” Kendoh turned to the Sith bodyguard. “FimmRess, make this intruder a distant memory, will you?”

FimmRess looked at Jhonnen and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Duke Kendoh, I am assigned to protect you and support your interest in the struggle for Alderaan. But I serve the Emperor first. And I will not cross Darth Baras or his apprentice.”

Jhonnen inclined his head politely. “Nice to meet you.”

“I consider you an ally, friend.”

Duke Kendoh looked appropriately intimidated as FimmRess bowed to Jhonnen in a display of submission. “Uh, okay. That was unexpected.” Kendoh cleared his throat. “It seems I may have
been hasty regarding your master’s needs. How can I made amends?”

“Do what Baras told you to do and find me Jaesa Willsaam’s family,” Jhonnen said tersely. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do once he found them but he was going to avoid killing them in he got the chance.

“I pledge the same level of focus that had me so absorbed in my own work,” Kendoh said. “I pledge myself to your directives, and as I aid you, perhaps you’ll be moved to help me in mine.”

“We’ll see what happens.” Jhonnen said flatly. He didn’t trust Kendoh. The man wasn’t lying, Jhonnen could feel that, but he was scheming and he had the homefront advantage over Jhonnen.

“I am focused and at your service. As I recall, Darth Baras wanted information on a young Alderaanian girl who was taken off-planet to train with Jedi Master Nomen Karr. I was to locate her family so that you could, well, send the girl a message.”

Jhonnen nodded. It wasn’t going to be the message Baras was hoping for if Jhonnen could help it. But yes, a message.

“The truth is,” continued Kendoh, “information about this girl is difficult to come by. I managed only one lead. Nomen Karr’s padawan fits the description of the former handmaiden of a noblewoman in House Alde named Lady Renata. I’d have questioned her already, but Renata is protected by House Alde’s greatest champion. The man has never met his match in melee.”

“Well, he hasn’t met me yet so we’ll just have to see,” Jhonnen said, leaning into the enforcer role Baras was shoehorning him into. And it fit. Jhonnen was faster with a lightsaber than he was with his mouth, and given how quick he was to mouth off, that was saying something.

“If I may,” said Duke Kendon, very polite for someone who had tried to have Jhonnen killed. “Once you’ve eliminated her protector and gotten everything you need… I would be personally very indebted if you’d arrange to have Lady Renata brought to us. For questioning.”

Jhonnen’s glare sharped. He didn’t believe the bit about questioning for an instant. “I’m not your delivery boy,” he said sternly. He wasn’t going to assist in a kidnapping. Not in this sort of kidnapping anyway.

What he was planning to do with Jaesa could be construed as kidnapping (whisk her away from everything she knew) but hopefully he’d be able to talk her into it and it was a matter of saving her life.

“While House Alde is a small player on Alderaan, but it is affiliated with House Organa. Therefore, Lady Renata’s estate is in hostile territory and very well defended. Be cautious.”

“I appreciate the warning,” said Jhonnen, who only slightly meant it. “We’ll return soon,” he looked at Quinn and then left the building. “What do you make of that?” he asked as they hopped onto the speeder.

“I don’t trust him, my lord. But his information is the only lead we have.”

“True enough,” Jhonnen sighed. “Can’t believe he thought I was going to help him kidnap somebody.”

Lady Renata’s champion fell faster than Jhonnen felt he should have if he was House Alde’s greatest champion. There was always a degree of luck in combat and anyone who said otherwise
was either an idiot or purposefully trying to mislead. Perhaps today just hadn’t been the man’s day. Lady Renata trembled as Jhonnen hooked his lightsaber back to his belt and turned back to her.

“This can’t be. Um, I’m sorry I ordered him to kill you, Sith.” She curled her hands in her skirt, words pouring out of her mouth. “I hope you don’t hold it against me. You see I’ve been fending off Duke Kendoh’s advances for some time and I just assumed you were here for him.” Her eyes darted to Quinn and then back to Jhonnen, wide and wet and desperate. “If you’re not working for the duke, I—I’ll gladly cooperated. You—you mentioned a—a—a girl, yes? Jaesa something.”

“Willsaam,” Jhonnen said. “Apparently a handmaiden of yours.”

Lady Renata shook her head. “Kendoh lied to you. I was aware of the young handmaiden who left Alderaan with a Jedi Master. And I, I did hear the name Jaesa Willsaam, but you’re mistaken, I didn’t know her. The girl never served me.”

She was telling the truth. Jhonnen sighed. “Then we apologize for the intrusion and the unfortunate loss of your guard.” He felt force signatures behind him and turned to watch FimmRess and a handful of Duke Kendoh’s guards entering the room behind him.

Lady Renata froze, mouth half-open with horror.

“I’m sure Duke Kendoh will double his efforts to help you find what you seek,” FimmRess said. “The duke congratulates you on your impressive venture into House Alde. I’m here to take the fair lady to him.”

Jhonnen started to lift his brow when Lady Renata howled the word “no” and flung herself to her knees at his feet. “Don’t let him take me to that… that pig.” She began to weep. “I do know who the girl worked for. I’ll tell you all I can, if only you’ll keep me from Duke Kendoh.”

Jhonnen nodded and let his voice soften. “Tell me what you know.”

Lady Renata wet her lips and squeezed her eyes closed. “Before she left with the Jedi, Jaesa Willsaam was the handmaiden of Gesselle Organa of House Organa. They were inseparable. Before the war, Gesselle was an aristocrat like myself. Now she leads the Organan troops against House Ulgo.”

Ulgo, that was the name he kept forgetting. Jhonnen nodded his thanks. “Where can I find her?”

“H—her headquarters are somewhere on the front lines,” Lady Renata answered. She folded her hands in front of her a pleaded with a quiet “please”.

“The duke will know where to find Gesselle Organa and how to reach her,” FimmRess said. “If you let me deliver Lady Renata to him, I’m sure Kendoh will happily shed light on the situation for you.”

“The first hand laid on that woman without her express permission will be found on the floor bereft of ownership,” Jhonnen said with a smile. “Kendoh will just have to deal.”

“Is this wise, my lord?” Quinn said. “We risk alienating an ally over—”

“Wise or not it’s happening, Quinn,” Jhonnen said, cutting the other man off. “I might be little more than a fancy thug but I’m not handing women over to pushy men who won’t take no for an answer.” He looked at FimmRess to see if the other Sith was going to challenge him on it.

“Fine,” said FimmRess, looking only a little disappointed. “As I said, I will not oppose you, nor
will I defy your decision here. I meant what I said. I’m sure Kendon can help you find and confront Gesselle. You should consult with him on it.”

“I’ll do that,” said Jhonnen, unwilling to trust the duke farther than he could toss FimmRess unassisted. “Thank you.”

“I’ll update Kendoh so he knows to expect you.” FimmRess bowed his head and exiting the building, taking the guards with him.

Lady Renata shakily accepted Jhonnen’s hand to standing. She cleared her throat and put on a brave face. “Despite the destruction you caused, I hold you in high-esteem, Sith. I only hope that you make that worm Kendoh pay for misleading you. Take nothing he says at face value.”

“I’ll keep in in mind,” Jhonnen said.

When they left he gave Quinn a skeptical look. “You don’t approve?”

“I don’t see the benefit of alienating our contact in favor of the enemy, my lord.”

“Can you see the benefit of not handing a woman over to an abuser? Because I promise you, Kendoh didn’t really want her for questioning,”

Quinn was silent for a long moment as they made their way back to the speeder parked beyond Alde’s gates. “I… see, my lord.”

Duke Kendoh was a rotten little snake but unfortunately Jhonnen had to work with him. There was something fishy about being sent after the generators, but even Quinn had had to admit that it was the best plan they had and that it would work. Still they had no reason to trust Kendoh’s motivation. He was incensed by Jhonnen’s refusal to hand over Lady Renata.

Well he could be incensed, Jhonnen didn’t for one moment regret his decision. He was however, rapidly approaching a place of hoping Kendoh gave him a reason to end his miserable little lifespan. And that was never a comfortable place for Jhonnen to be.

With the generator down, Jhonnen stormed Gesselle Organa’s headquarters hoping at last that they could be done with this. He drove his lightsaber through the magnetic lock she was hiding behind and then forced the doors open inwards.

“Afternoon,” he said personably. “I have questions about Jaesa Willsaam.”

This was going to go badly. She was an opposing general. None of Jhonnen’s attempts to smooth things over would go well with Quinn and Quinn would report back to Baras. If Baras suspected weakness, it would jeopardize his attempt to save Jaesa Willsaam’s life. It would jeopardize his own life. And if he was killed someone else would kill Vitreous.

And Jhonnen had hungered for that death for too long.

“Gesselle, get behind me!” shouted one man, tall and handsome.

Gesselle, not General.

Well wasn’t that interesting.

“None of you panic,” said General Gessell. She set her hands on her hips, taking charge of the situation and staring down a sith lord like it wasn’t a big deal.
Jhonnen had to respect that. Which made what was bound to happen a tragedy.

“Sith, did I hear you right? You’ve perpetrated all this in search of my former handmaiden?”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said. “Tell me where to find her family.”

“Like me, you’ll stop at nothing to achieve your goals.” Gesselle drew herself to her full height, towering over Jhonnen but a little shorter than Quinn. “You decimated my forces outside. They were to be deployed to secure a part of my front that’s about to fall. Now I have no reinforcements. You seek information only I have, and my front needs bolstering. Perhaps we can help each other.”

He wanted to say yes. He desperately wanted to say yes. But what she was asking was probably treason and while he didn’t think Quinn was dumb enough to oppose him outright, Baras would definitely hear about it.

He wished he’d brought Vette.

“You’re not in a position to bargain,” he said flatly.

Gesselle snorted. “I’m not a commander with a soft heart. My actions are always dictated by the big picture.”

Jhonnen curled his will around the throat of the tall, handsome man who had tried to get Gesselle to hide behind him. He constricted the other man’s airways from across the room and lifted him into the air.

She would cave.

He hoped she would cave before he killed her boytoy.

“This isn’t working,” she shook her head and tried not to look but her eyes were drawn inevitably to the way her man clawed at his throat. “I’m not so… I’m not so easily… No! Stop! Please, Blenks is my lover, I’ll tell you everything just please don’t kill him.”

Jhonnen raised his brow skeptically.

“Jaesa Willsaam’s parents are servants in castle Organa! They’re stationed in the central tower! He —here,” she fumbled with a pocket and threw a passkey at him. “It’s a pass key that will gain you entry to their chamber just please stop choking Blenks.”

Jhonnen let go of Blenks, who collapsed on the ground wheezing. He stooped to pick up the passkey. “Come on, Captain.”

He turned and left before Gesselle could say anything further.

“Masterfully handled, my lord.”

Jhonnen gave him a wooden smile. He felt like a monster.

The feeling lingered as he and Quinn traveled to and fought through Organa castle. So many lives and so much destruction to terrorize one girl. Because she was special. Jhonnen thought while he battled his way up the many staircases designed to make the castle feel as impenetrable as the surrounding mountains.

He had been special. That was why his mother had had to die. Why every bad thing had happened.
He could send Jaesa another message. Another hint to his plan.

Hopefully it would all be over soon.

Quinn didn’t fight like Vette. He was mostly silent as he shot his foes with an accuracy Vette simply didn’t possess. Despite his skill, he didn’t make Jhonnen feel as supported. It felt more like they were two people attacking in the same direction than a team that was working together.

Maybe that was just the fact that this was the first time they’d fought together. Maybe there was something special about fighting alongside Vette. Jhonnen didn’t know and, as he slid the passkey into the door that would lead him to the Willsaams, he didn’t particularly care.

Jaesa’s parents were middle-aged and average in every way as far as Jhonnen could tell. Their companion, however, warranted a moment’s concern. A jedi knight, robed and armed, waiting for Jhonnen and Quinn to enter the room.

“No!” shouted Mrs. Willsaam. “General Gesselle’s warning was true! The sith has come for us.”

The Jedi darted in front of the couple, lightsaber drawn.

“I didn’t think a single assailant could make it through Castle Organa’s defenses all the way here to us,” said Mr. Willsaam.

Jhonnen shrugged his shoulders. “The Organan guards put up a fight, that’s for sure.”

“It will feel like child’s play compared to facing me, Sith,” said the Jedi. “You will not harm Parvin and Gregor Willsaam. I vow it.”

Ah, Jedi, always jumping to conclusions.

A reasonable conclusion in this case, but still.

“That’s handy because I’m not actually looking to hurt them,” Jhonnen said. “Everyone keeps assuming my motives are violent. Feels pretty racist to be honest.”

The jedi snorted. “You murdered countless innocents to get here, and now you want to make friends?”

Gregor Willsaam took a step forward. “Please, Master Jedi, I realize the Sith can’t be trusted, but I want to hear this.”

The Jedi scowled but nodded. “Fine. Say your piece, Sith. I’m not going anywhere, and I will protect them, no matter what.”

He was itching for an excuse and it showed in his body language. Jhonnen kept his own posture fairly relaxed.

“Gregor,” said Parvin, “this has to do with Jaesa, I just know it.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen nodded as he said it. “I’m here because of your daughter.”

“Jaesa was our life,” said Parvin. “She was going to marry Organa nobility so that we would no longer have to be servants.”

Gregor curled an arm around his wife, both supportive and being supported. “When she… left, we sacrificed that dream. We don’t know anything about Jaesa now. We were told we would probably
never see her again. We are mere servants. What could you want with us?”

“I want you to move to Dromund Kaas where you’ll live comfortably for the rest of your days,” Jhonnen said.

“You… you want to help us?” Gregor said, the words hesitant and halting.

“No, Gregor,” Parvin squeezed him tighter. “The Sith is toying with us before killing us!”

“Heed your wife’s warning, Gregor Willsaam. Sith are devious and demented,” warned the Jedi.

“That is, frequently true.” Jhonnen nodded. “But in this case, I’m stone cold serious. If you align with the Empire, you live and you live comfortably.”

Parvin’s nostrils flared with irritation. “You dirty, no good cretin—”

“Parvin,” Gregor set his hands on her shoulders. “Jaesa has gone off to a life of discipline and detachment. We are unlikely to ever see her again. The Sith is offering us a way out of this. A way to live.”

“Jaesa is sensitive, Gregor,” Parvin warned. “She will feel our betrayal. It will fester in her. Don’t you see, this Sith is banking on that.”

“I am trying to save your lives,” Jhonnen said evenly. “Let me buy your lives.”

“My wife can’t see the big picture,” Gregor said, squeezing Parvin’s shoulders. “You offer a choice between death or pledging ourselves to our daughter’s enemy. I choose that Parvin and I live in the arms of the Empire. And I trust that my daughter will understand and remain strong.”

“And what about you, Parvin?”

Parvin looked at the floor and then looked at her husband. She sighed. “My place is with you, Gregor. As long as we’re alive, there’s hope.”

Gregor exhaled. “We are in agreement. We shall embrace the Empire. Tell us what happens next.”

“You’ll take the first shuttle to Dromund Kaas, by the time you get there, arrangements will have been made. You will live more comfortably there than here as servants.”

The Jedi cleared his throat. “I’m so glad you’ve all found an accord. But there’s still the matter of you being our enemy, Sith. Not only will I not allow the Willsaams to do this, but you had yourself a killing spree getting here, that can’t go unpunished.”

“I thought Jedi were all about embracing non-violent solutions. I have said, plainly, that I just wished to speak with the Willsaams at every step. It’s not my fault you all see red when you see red.”

“Yes, Master Volryder,” said Gregor. “Stay true to the Jedi code and keep the peace. Too many have died already today.”

Parvin nodded, still unable to look at Jhonnen. “Gregor and I go of our own free will. And spare this house any further pain.”

Volryder glared but unignited his lightsaber. “This doesn’t sit right, but I can’t attack someone walking in peace. Even a Sith.”
“So it goes,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. Volryder was a better jedi than most that Jhonnen had heard about. It was an order of people preaching non-violence while they were all spoiling for a fight.

“Leave out the back door to avoid further casualties,” Volryder pointed. “I’ll say nothing forward.”

Jhonnen escorted Gregor and Parvin to the spaceport and saw them aboard the first shuttle to Dromund Kaas. His holo buzzed and he produced it, offering a small bob of his head to Darth Baras on the other end.

“Ah, apprentice,” Baras said. “The Sith FimmRess who attends Duke Kendoh was able to patch me through to you directly. Excellent. I am seeking an update. News of your search for Jaesa Willsaam’s family has reached me, and I am quite concerned.”

Which sounded bad.

“I’ve just put the parents on a shuttle to Dromund Kaas, they’ll live comfortably and Jaesa will feel their betrayal fester.”

“Very conniving,” Baras praised. “The happier they are under Imperial rule, the more it will tear at the Jedi’s heart. I will make it so. You eclipse my greatest hopes for you and prove you belong at my side. Which,” Baras paused for a moment. “Makes my susceptibility to Duke Kendoh’s gossip about you all the more foolish.”

“Out of curiosity, what did that walking infection say?”

“First off, Kendoh said that you set an explosion that caused the death of several Thul dignitaries.”

Jhonnen’s mouth thinned to a line. The generator. “Did he now?”

“I assume then, that that wasn’t the case. Shouldn’t surprise me. Kendoh also said that you had the general of Organa’s military forces at your mercy, and you spared her. Suggesting that you’re a traitor?”

“Has he finally outlived his usefulness?” Jhonnen asked, unable to deny that he had done that but more interesting in Kendoh’s angle.

Baras shrugged. “All that matters to me is that your mission is complete. For whatever reason, the man has taken it upon himself to slander you. I have no further use for Duke Kendoh. Punish him however you please. If it were me, he’d pay severely.”

“I’ll have chat with him and see if I can get to the bottom of this.”

“Do what you will, but quickly. Until we destroy the threat of Jaesa Willsaam, nothing else is important. Goodbye apprentice.”

Jhonnen tucked his holo away. “Quinn.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Do you know how Kendoh found out that I spared Gesselle Organa?”

“I imagine with ease, she’s a notable public figure.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Let’s go have a chat with that asshole. Possibly a lightsaber chat.”
They returned to Duke Kendoh’s chambers and Jhonnen narrowed his eyes at the duke, folding his arms over his chest. “So, someone had a very interesting talk with Darth Baras a little while ago and I would like to know precisely how far you can cram your foot down your throat.”

The Duke looked moderately alarmed, which was not quite pissing himself and Jhonnen was really going for pissing himself.

“Oh, uh, I... I see. How awkward for me. Allow me to explain.”

Jhonnen raised his brow, which was as close to permission as Kendoh was going to get.

“I realized when you blew up the power generator, several of my rivals would be exposed. So, I seized the opportunity to eliminate them. I... had company when I was speaking with your master, and I needed to keep my fellow house members blind to my maneuvering—”

“That is a lie,” snapped FimmRess. “You contacted Baras yourself, alone.”

“Uh-oh,” Jhonnen said. “This doesn’t end well for you.”

“I—I,” Kendoh’s eyes went wide and he had finally reached the pissing himself stage of fear. “I only wanted Baras to know that I was looking out for him. It was harmless. I knew that you would succeed, and all Baras would care about was that. Please please don’t kill me.” He turned to FimmRess. “FimmRess, you are assigned to me. If I am attacked, you must defend.”

Jhonnen looked at FimmRess.

FimmRess shook his head. “If Darth Baras’s apprentice decides you die, we will not intercede.”

Jhonnen had a half second of hesitation. But he’d made the moves so far, to back out now would be to show weakness he couldn’t afford in front of Quinn.

“That’s the decision,” he said with a jaunty shrug.

FimmRess’s shoulders relaxed a little and he actually smiled. “It will be a pleasure to be relieved of this assignment. Can I help at all?”

Jhonnen ignited his lightsaber and drove it through Duke Kendoh’s chest, taking a step backwards as he withdrew so the man collapsed at his feet. Quick and clean, no need to make him suffer. “I’ve got it.”

FimmRess looked at the body and then took a deep breath like he was breathing for the first time. “He was a sad and twisted waste of space. Serving him was torture.”

“Well, hopefully your next assignment doesn’t suck so bad.” Jhonnen offered.

“Now I report back to my master on the Council. I will be paying attention to your exploits.” FimmRess bowed and then left. Jhonnen considered going through Kendoh’s pockets and remembered that Quinn was there and Quinn would not approve.

They headed back to the spaceport in relative silence and boarded The Sanguine Tide.

“How’d it go?” asked Vette. Quinn headed for the cockpit.

“Murder, mayhem, think I missed you.”

Vette chuckled a little. “You are never going to guess what I’ve been doing.”
“I could give a try.”

“No, no, don’t try. I’ll tell you,” Vette beamed. “While you guys were off being bad guys, I’ve been checking holo frequencies and I found the old gang. They’re on Nar Shaddaa!”

Her smile was infectious, catching to Jhonnen’s mouth.

“They weren’t leaving messages for me in the old sport. I thought they got themselves caught or dead or something.”

“That’s incredible, Vette.” Jhonnen grinned but his heart threatened to crack. Surely now she would leave him, go back to what she had been doing before Korriban interrupted her life.

“Old gang’s been on the run since I’ve been gone. Apparently our mysterious informant for the Korriban job was that piece of shit Cada Bliss.” Vette shook her head as though disappointed in herself. “Bliss sure got revenge for the job we pulled on him. Fake mission, fake cover story. I’m thrown in the slave pens and he hits the gang hard.”

“So he’s where I should send the fruit basket for getting to know you?” Jhonnen asked. He shook his head to indicate that his was kidding.

Vette laughed a little. “You are so weird.” She sighed and got back to her story. “Once they escaped the mercenaries, Taunt and what’s left of the old gang spent their last credits tracking Cada Bliss’s movements. That duros snake has managed to get his hands on the Star of Kala’unn. It’s a priceless piece of Twi’lek history. I want to get it back.”

“Alright. Do we know where he is?”

Vette lit up. “You’re fantastic! Cada Bliss is at the spaceport on Nar Shaddaa, trying to line up a buyer. I’ll send a message that we’re coming. Make us out to be interested buyers. Oh, and I’ll tell the gang to get ready to receive the artifact.”

“I assume my role in this is ‘extra muscle’?” Jhonnen said, cocking his brow and grinning at her.

“Bliss has some famous kaleesh bodyguard they call ‘the Virus’ working for him these days—but that’s not going to worry you, is it?”

“Worrying is for suckers and people with long life expectancies. I’m a Sith apprentice, I’m neither of those things.” He shrugged and turned on the holoterminal, sending a call out to Baras for the official debrief.

Vette curled up on the sofa as Baras flickered into view.

“You crushed Alderaan under you boot, apprentice. I am incredibly impressed; the planet will feel the sting for years to come.”

“I’m just happy it’s over,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest.

“By rooting out this Jaesa Willsaam’s parents you have reached across the galaxy to strike a sharp blow at our enemies. Every lead followed perfectly. Every planet ravaged. Our adversary is growing antsy, I can feel it. Expect news soon, Baras out.”

Jhonnen dropped his shoulders and then tensed them again when Quinn cleared his throat. “My lord.”
“Yes, Quinn?”

Quinn stood stiffly, “I thought it prudent not to interrupt Darth Baras. We received a recorded transmission. It is queued when you are ready.”

Jhonnen nodded and Quinn started the recording. A human woman, maybe Jhonnen’s age maybe a little younger in plain jedi robes stood on the holo, her frown was gentle as she began to speak.

“Sith, I’m Jaesa Willsaam. My master, Nomen Karr, has no idea I’m sending this message. Let’s be real—we both know this isn’t about us.”

Quinn touched his chin thoughtfully. “Ah, the hunted seeks the hunter.”

“Our masters pretend otherwise,” Jaesa continued. “But this is personal. You and I are only pawns in their private war. And those I care about are caught in the middle. It has to stop.”

“Wow,” Vette said from the sofa. “Gotta give to her, she sure got guts.”

“Yeah, she does,” Jhonnen agreed, more determined than ever to try and save her life.

“I appreciate directness,” Jaesa said. “And as merciful as your actions have been, it’s time you stopped this passive-aggressive campaign. This message included coordinates where I’ll be waiting in my ship. Let’s discuss this face-to-face. No more nonsense.”

The message ended and Jhonnen looked at his crew. “Impressions?”

“It could be a trap, my lord.” Quinn said with a delicate frown. “Nomen Karr may have put her up to it.”

Vette shook her head. “Don’t listen to Captain Paranoid here. I don’t think it’s a trap. I trust her.”

Jhonnen nodded. “I appreciate it, both of you. Trap or not we should investigate, but if is Jaesa Willsaam, this whole campaign may get a lot simpler.”

“The coordinates are set, my lord,” said Quinn. “We can rendezvous with her ship whenever you give the word.”

“I have business on Nar Shaddaa first, but afterwards, we’ll see what Jaesa Willsaam wants to talk about.”
Bending So We Don't Break

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen finally tracks down Jaesa Willsaam and attempts to put his plan into action.

Jhonnen took a few moments as they landed on Nar Shaddaa to try and find Kira again. However, once more his efforts were fruitless. Exiting his room, Jhonnen, through the disappointment and emptiness, told himself this was a good thing. If he found Kira she might want to come with him, and he would kill himself and everyone else before he let them make Kira Sith. He met Vette at the airlock and followed her off the ship.

At least they didn’t have to go far, Cada Bliss was supposed to meet them at the spaceport.

Standing at the foot of a shuttle, Cada Bliss was pretty far from impressive. A moneyed duros with little respect for anyone else’s life or livelihood. His kaleesh bodyguard towered over him, but Jhonnen, walking a little bit behind Vette, wasn’t concerned. Bliss took note of them and looked notably more annoyed than frightened, which Jhonnen figured was fair. In the casual outfit he had thrown together, Jhonnen didn’t look like a sith lord if you didn’t notice the lightsabers on his hips.

<< Now you two certainly don’t look like Corellian art dealers, >> said Bliss. << Virus, is it possible that we have been deceived? That this clever rat tail thief has caught us unawares? >>

“What did you call me?” Vette said at the exact same time as Jhonnen demanded, “What did you call her?”

“No,” the Virus shook his head. “Not possible.”

<< Then these two have just walked themselves into a very dangerous situation. >>

“Hand over the Star of Kala’unn and everyone keeps their various limbs,” Jhonnen said, falling into the role of enforcer.

<< Do you hear this, Virus? >>

“I hear.”

<< Apparently someone thinks you’ve never killed a sith before. Someone thinks Sith scare you. >>

“You two are hilarious, you could headline at the Star Cluster Casino,” Jhonnen said flatly.

Vette cleared her throat. “Cada Bliss, you have exploited my people, stolen our artifacts and committed numerous crimes against twi’leks the galaxy over.”

Bliss didn’t look amused or intimidated. He turned his attention back to his bodyguard. << Virus? Do we have any room in the harem for an exceedingly ugly and underdeveloped rat tail slave girl? >>

Virus shook his head. “We’re full up on ugly.”
Jhonnen drew his weapon and glared at them. Vette was gorgeous but that wasn’t even the point. They couldn’t get away with calling her a rat tail. He wouldn’t stand for it.

Bliss eyed the lightsaber handle in Jhonnen’s hand and said, << Sith probably make bad slaves too. All right, kill ’em both. >>

Jhonnen chucked Bliss into the shuttle hard enough to stun him and kicked the Virus in the knee as he drew his vibroblade. The interrupt was enough for Vette to shoot the Virus a couple of times in the chest and the kaleesh warrior went down.

Bliss picked himself up and held his hands up in surrender.

<< Hey, let’s not get all crazy here. Clearly I thought you were someone else. >> Bliss straightened to standing. << See, there was this other twi’lek girl, total pain, you know? She kept calling me— Anyway, long story but sorry about the mix up, you know? >>

Jhonnen did not unignite his lightsaber. He looked to Vette.

She pointed at Bliss. “Cada Bliss, you have exploited my people, stolen our artifacts and committed numerous crimes against twi’leks the galaxy over.”

<< I get it, I get it. You practiced, it’s a nice speech I like it. >>

“Return the Star of Kala’unn, promise to reform, and we may show mercy,” Vette said through her frown.

<< You are a generous, beautiful woman. I’ve always said that the twi’lek woman was a superior being suited to the finest— >>

Vette pulled her blaster on him.

<< Yeah I’m going. >>

Cada Bliss shuffled away and Vette smiled at Jhonnen. “I’ll grab the Star of Kala’unn. We can meet the old gang here on Nar Shaddaa. They’ll make sure the Star ends up in a museum. In twi’lek hands.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jhonnen agreed, holstering his lightsaber. “Should be interesting, meeting your friends.”

“You’ll love Taunt.”

“That’s the pretty one everyone falls in love with, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Jhonnen smiled and followed Vette out of the hangar, privately doubting that Taunt was the pretty one and unsure of how he’d handle it if she was.

They found a place out of the way in the spaceport, kind of near the food court, to wait for Taunt and the others. Vette vibrated with excitement, her lekku twitching with anticipation. They didn’t have to wait long.

“Well look who the akk dog dragged in,” said a feminine voice.

Vette jolted to her feet and sprinted into the arms of an, admittedly, very pretty red twi’lek. Taunt,
presumably, was flanked by two other guys, both twi’lek, who grinned at Vette.

“Taunt! Guys!” Vette exclaimed, taking a step back so Jhonnen could join them.

Taunt gave Jhonnen a warm smile. “And this must be the handsome Sith you’ve been seeing the galaxy with.” She looked him up and down. “Impressive.” Her lekku twitched with interest, which Jhonnen hadn’t expected.

“Handsome?” Jhonnen laughed. “That’s a first. And I’ve got both hands full with the pretty twi’lek girl already in my life.”

“You’re… oh!” Taunt laughed. “Good luck trying to crack that safe.”

Jhonnen snorted and shook his head. It wasn’t like that, he didn’t think, but explaining that would involve clueing Vette in on his brain sometimes going there and nobody needed that.

“Am I missing something?” Vette asked, her lekku twitched with irritation and Jhonnen wasn’t sure if it was because Taunt had been flirting with him or if it was because she was being talked about.

Taunt shook her head. “Just joking, love. Don’t sweat it. Shall we talk business?”

Vette nodded enthusiastically and handed over the case with the Star of Kala’ unn inside. “It’s authentic and undamaged,” she told them.

<< This is big! >> said one of the male twi’leks.

“Got that right,” said the other. “Most important single blow for Twi’lek pride. All you, Vette.”

“You got that right,” Jhonnen agreed. “She killed a bodyguard, gave a speech and saved the day.”

<< Amazing, little girl. Amazing. Who’s got the finder’s fee? >>

Taunt produced a cred-chit. “Here. It’s every credit we could scrape together. Don’t worry, we should be able to sweet talk the museum into getting some of that back.”

“Oh no,” Vette shook her head. “I know you guys. You won’t even be eating. You have to buy equipment, bribe fees,” she looked at Jhonnen. “We don’t need your credits. Do we?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “It’s your show, Vette. Your call.”

“Then I say keep the credits. Have a big dinner for me.” Vette laughed. “Get some new gear.”

<< You coming with us, girl? >> asked the larger male twi’lek.

The blood ran out of Jhonnen’s face. This was it and all he could do was handle it with grace. He had to let her leave even though she was the only person he even kind of trusted. She would be happier back in her old life.

“I…” Vette paused and then shook her head. “No.”

Jhonnen’s eyes went wide.

“I’ve found a place.” Vette continued. “I’m going to stay put for a while. But I’ll keep in touch.”

Taunt nodded, her lekku a little sad but her smile warm and genuine. “You’ve at least got time for a
meal, right? Let us show a Sith a good time?"

“We’ve got time,” Jhonnen said. “And I’m eager for a good time that isn’t put on by the Sith.”

“Blood sacrifice not doing it for you?” Vette teased.

“It’s just so hard to get the stains out,” Jhonnen teased back. He looked to Taunt. “Lead the way.”

The five of them took a taxi to the Promenade and found a restaurant where they ate and talked. Jhonnen mostly kept to himself, chiming in occasionally to answer a question or tease Vette a little. Taunt touched his leg with hers beneath the table to get his attention and pull him into a private conversation.

“Is she happy?” Taunt asked.

Jhonnen frowned a little. “I try, but it’s hard to tell some days.” He looked over at where Vette was laughing, taking animatedly with one of her old friends in Rylothain, her lekku moving (joy, amusement). He’d never seen her like this.

Vette turned her face and grinned at him, wrinkling her nose and crinkling her eyes with delight.

Taunt was pretty.

But Vette was something else entirely.

“You alright?” Vette asked as they headed back to the ship after the small impromptu party.

“You’re uncharacteristically quiet.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “It’s been a long time since I’ve thought about what a group of friends was like. A family.”

“You don’t have any family?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “My dad murdered my mom so I avoid him as best I can. My only friends were left on Nar Shaddaa when I was… kidnapped.”

“Baras gives you a lot of wiggle room, you could look them up.”

“Kira… that was my best friend… hates sith. I mean hates.” He shook his head. “It was just nice seeing you and the gang. It was something I’d missed.”

They went through the airlock, back onto the ship proper and headed their separate ways. Jhonnen watched the hallway Vette had disappeared down. He’d never seen her so happy, and she’d elected to stay behind, with him, rather that return to her friends.

He didn’t understand it. He was grateful, but he didn’t understand.

Quinn was off confronting Voloren, the SIS agent, when the Sanguine Tide rendezvoused with Jaesa Willsaam’s ship. Jhonnen left Vette behind in case of trouble and boarded by himself. With any luck he could talk to Jaesa one-on-one and convince her that his plan, while risky and stupid, was at least less risky and stupid.

The deeper into the ship he pressed, the worse he felt about his odds. Nomen Karr clearly kept Jaesa on a short leash, it was unlikely he’d let her go into deep space without him.
This was a trap.

But, he was already here.

His attempts to muster surprise when he was met by two Jedi knights instead of one padawan were met with failure. He sighed and let his shoulders drop with disappointment as he approached.

“Hiya,” he said pleasantly. “Let me guess, trap?”

“The padawan you seek is not here,” said the first and taller of the two knights. “Master Karr discovered her plan and talked her out of it.”

“It’s not your day,” said the other. “You were expecting one lowly padawan to crush, and instead you get us.”

“I’m shocked,” Jhonnen said, unable to muster even a thin veneer of surprise.

“I’m Ulldin,” said the tall Jedi. “This is Zylixx. We are fully trained Jedi knights, and more than your match. You should submit.”

“Of course,” Zylixx said. “We have yet to encounter a Sith who had the sense to surrender. You all seem bent on having us destroy you.”

Jhonnen sighed. Yet another Jedi knight spoiling for a fight. “You’re itching for a go at me,” Jhonnen said to Zylixx. “You radiate with it. I think you’d actually pout if I surrendered.”

“Not at all,” said Ulldin, probably lying. “We don’t go around picking fights.”

It was one Jedi in a million who didn’t go around picking fights.

“I wouldn’t trust it if the Sith surrendered,” said Zylixx, proving Jhonnen’s point. “I prefer the sureness of death.”

“Isn’t that a little bloodthirsty for a follower of the light side of the Force? Aren’t you supposed to practice temperance?”

“Who are you to lecture about the light side?” demanded Zylixx. “The sith force us to take measures like this.”

“I’m not forcing you to do anything,” Jhonnen said with a shrug, wishing he had back up.

“You, Sith, pose an exception,” Ulldin pointed out. “Your vile efforts to hurt Nomen Kadd and Jaesa Willsaam are provocation enough.”

“I’m literally just trying to talk to her,” Jhonnen said. “Everything I’ve done has been to try and talk to her. Your buddy here is itching for an excuse to carve me into little sith ribbons.”

“That’s enough out of you!” shouted Zylixx, proving Jhonnen’s point some more. “Ulldin, it’s time to end this!”

“No, Zylixx,” Ulldin shook his head. “I… I’m unsure. Master Karr claims this Sith means Jaesa harm, but we have no proof.”

“Master Karr’s word is proof enough! I have no crisis of conscience assuming his assessment is sound.”
Ulldin shook his head again. “That’s an assumption I cannot make, my friend. I will not engage. I must walk away and urge you to do the same.” Ulldin left, heading deeper into the ship.

Zylixx glared at Jhonnen, hatred radiating off of him. “You may have derailed Ulldin’s resolve, Sith, but your luck ends there. I’ll take you on myself.”

“That would be incredibly stupid of you,” Jhonnen said. “Just let me leave.”

“Never,” Zylixx went for his lightsaber and Jhonnen threw him backwards into the bulkhead door, buying time to get both of his lightsabers out. He blocked the Jedi’s strikes, fighting defensively.

“This is unnecessary,” he said.

Zylixx just growled at him.

Jhonnen parried a thrust and slid into Zylixx’s guard, jumping up to knee him in the face, maintaining contact as the Jedi hit the ground. Jhonnen unignited his lightsaber and socked Zylixx in the jaw.

“Yield!” he demanded. Zylixx spat blood at him as Jhonnen moved off of him and pointed his lightsaber at Zylixx’s throat. “Yield,” he said, a little more sternly.

Zylixx’s breathing was ragged through the blood and broken nose. “Damb Ulldib por leabing me alobe.”

“You did this to yourself.” Jhonnen stepped over and knocked Zylixx unconscious. “And I can’t have you following me.”

He turned and headed back the way he’d come to *The Sanguine Tide*, letting himself aboard and disengaging the umbilical that had linked the two ships.

“How’d it go?” asked Vette.

“Trap,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “I’m going to call Quinn and figure out where we need to pick him up.”

Vette’s eyes drifted to Jhonnen’s knuckles. “You alright?”

“Fine, Vette, it’s not my blood.”

“I’m pleased to report that your exploits have been successful,” Baras said, calling *The Tide* a few days after the incident with Zylixx and Ulldin. “I have received a transmission from Nomen Karr—calling me out if you will. Challenging me to face him to the death. Our enemy has become desperate.”

*Your enemy*, Jhonnen thought. “He must be at his wits end,” he said.

“Your efforts to disrupt his precious padawan have unnerved him. He seeks to turn the tide. Karr fails to understand, I have outgrown our personal dispute,” Baras lied. “He expects me to jump at the chance of strangling him. He will be unprepared for you.”

While *that* was probably true, it felt to Jhonnen like this was Baras’s way of telling Karr ‘I don’t care anymore’ solely to get under Karr’s skin.

Jaesa was right and this was personal.
And now he was going to have to fight a jedi master because of it.

“The duel is to happen on Hutta,” Baras continued. “At the site of Nomen Karr’s betrayal so long ago. A fitting place for this to end.”

It must have been a really bad breakup.

“Defeat him,” Baras instructed. “But do not kill him. His torment will reach out to his padawan. He will be the bait that brings her to you.”

“Neat.” Jhonnen said, annoyed that now there were restrictions on his fighting a jedi master. You couldn’t deal non-lethal damage with a lightsaber. If he wasn’t fighting to kill he was at a disadvantage and he couldn’t afford that with a fucking jedi master.

“Subdue the master, and the pupil will come to save him. I have foreseen it.”

“Yes, my lord,” Jhonnen said dryly. Baras hadn’t foreseen shit. It wasn’t exactly unreasonable to suspect that Jaesa, feeling Karr’s distress, would come to avenge him.

And this whole thing was a colossal pain in the ass.

He swung into the cockpit and gave Quinn a thin smile. “So we’re going to Hutta.” There was something satisfying about the way Quinn wrinkled his nose. “Don’t worry, I’ll be going by myself this time.”

Quinn frowned, turning in his seat to frown at Jhonnen. “My lord. If I’m not mistaken you’ll be facing a Jedi master. You should take back-up.”

“If I take backup I run the risk of Master Karr snapping your or Vette’s neck to distract or dishearten me. I’m not willing to risk it.” Jhonnen shrugged. “Stick close to the ship, Quinn. That’s a order.”

Quinn’s frown deepened. “Yes, my lord.” He turned to lay in the course to Hutta.

Jhonnen headed to his room and flopped face-first onto his mattress. He wondered if he’d be able to talk Master Karr down, but the only person he’d managed to talk down had been Ulldin and he’d still wound up in a fight.

He was a pureblood sith apprentice, everything Nomen Karr was bound to hate. And his plan to save Jaesa from Baras necessitated the removal of Master Karr.

This was going to suck. There was no way to make this not suck.

He remained in his room, sulking, until they reached Hutta. He left the ship by himself, almost sneaking out to avoid having to repeat the conversation he’d had with Quinn with Vette.

His boots squelched in the foul-smelling mud as soon as he left the shuttle. Jhonnen wrinkled his nose and made his way through Jiguuna’s streets and outside of town where he took a speeder to the safe house Nomen Karr planned to meet Baras at. He took a deep breath to quiet his anxiety and headed inside.

Maybe he was lucky and Nomen Karr wasn’t there yet.

Jhonnen headed inside and frowned in disappointment at the Jedi master standing in the middle of the room. It had been too much to ask that he have a few minutes to himself before all this
banthashit got started. He was an idiot for not bringing back-up, but at least this way Quinn and Vette were safe.

Nomen Karr unfolded from his meditation and gave a heavy sigh. “Your presence tells me that my fellows Ulldin and Zylixx must have failed. Pity.” He shook his head. “I should have known Baras couldn’t be trusted. As a man of my word—I’m here, alone, as agreed. Your master shows himself a coward, sending you in his stead.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Yep, he’s a stinker.”

“You are young in the Force, a mere apprentice. I’m a full Jedi Master,” Karr reminded him.

“Yep.” The odds were seriously stacked against him. “It’s my first time, be gentle.”

Nomen Karr frowned more deeply at Jhonnen’s attempt to make light of the situation. “You are Baras’s pawn—an especially resourceful and powerful one, but still only that. I must put an end to you.”

“Jedi leap to that conclusion like trained nexu through hoops,” Jhonnen said flatly.

Karr’s jaw tensed. “Once you are out of the way, Jaesa will provide the proof I need to open the Jedi Council’s eyes and expose Baras’s network of spies.”

“Is there anyway I can talk you out of this?” Jhonnen asked, almost as much for Karr’s sake as for his own.

“This ends now, Sith.” Nomen Karr shoved him backwards, tossing him like a ragdoll into the opposing wall. Jhonnen, stunned, barely brought his blades up to block in time. He planted a foot in Karr’s stomach and forced the Jedi Master back so he could scramble to his feet.

Karr lunged forward, Jhonnen parried and socked the master in the face with his fist enclosed around the hilt of his lightsaber. Karr flipped backwards, catching Jhonnen in the chin with his foot.

Jhonnen extended the Force around himself, forcing his negative emotions out around him like a defensive shield made of all his barbs, wounding the jedi master as they closed again.

“The Force… is very strong with you,” grunted Nomen Karr. “I… must dig deeper.”

Familiar dark side miasma swirled around Nomen Karr’s feet.

“We can end this with all of our limbs intact,” Jhonnen said, bringing up his weapons to block and getting headbutted in the face for his trouble. Blood streamed down from his nose to coat his lips. His eyes watered and he was forced to roll to the side. He kicked out, tripping Nomen Karr and sending them both to the floor where they had to rely on hitting one another rather than on their lightsabers.

Karr threw him off and Jhonnen skidded across the room.

“Fall!” Karr screamed. “You must fall to me!” Lightning erupted from his fingers, proof that if anyone was falling it was him. Jhonnen deflected with his lightsaber and calmed himself. The more frantic Nomen Karr became, the more steady Jhonnen forced himself to be. He tossed the Jedi master into a wall hard enough to stun him and then ripped his lightsabers away with the force. Summoning his rage, Jhonnen reached and and curled his will around Nomen Karr’s throat and suffocated him until he was half conscious before dropping him.
Then, wincing, he popped his nose back into place with a crunch.

The sound of boots filled the hallway and Jhonnen took his eyes of Karr for long enough to confirm that they were Imperial boots and that his day wasn’t getting more complicated.

“My lord,” said the Imperial in charge. “Darth Baras sent us in case you... “

Died, Jhonnen thought helpfully.

“Needed help,” said the soldier. “Clearly that’s not the case. He said Nomen Karr should be kept alive. May we stabilize him?”

“No,” Karr growled weakly. “Baras be damned! I want... to die. Then Jaesa will be safe...”

Jhonnen sighed. “I’m not trying to hurt your padawan, Master Karr. Not that you believe a damn thing I say.”


He collapsed and the Imperials rushed to save him.

Jhonnen allowed his injuries to be tended to, hating the way the kolto shot made his face tingle and the way it had hurt to clean off his face. When Karr was conscious again, tied to a chair and still delirious from letting himself fall so rapidly, Jhonnen took over standing watch.

“I see through you, Sith,” snapped Karr. “You only saved me so that Jaesa would believe your heart is pure. I will not be the bait that draws Jaesa too you.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Jaesa will believe what Jaesa believes. I’m just going to talk to her about it.”

A while later the commandos at the front of the building called back to tell the commandos at the back of the building that Jaesa had arrived, and indeed, Jhonnen could sense her.

“Sith,” said Jaesa. “I have come, it seems I was expected—your men outside let me pass.” She pointed a finger at him accusatorially. “Release Master Karr; your efforts to draw me out have been a success.”

Karr was incensed by her presence, struggling against his bonds. “Jaesa, no! I told you to stay put! How dare you defy me.”

Jhonnen turned from Karr to Jaesa and gave her a thin smile. “It’s not exactly a pleasure to meet you, but I’m glad you’re here.”

“My sacrifice for nothing!” growled Nomen Karr. “Stupid child, for all your power, you have understood nothing.”

Jaesa stared in horror at her master. “What have you... done to him, Sith? Has this been inside him all along?” She shook her head, moisture clearly forming at the corners of her eyes. “No, it can’t be. No one can hide such darkness. Somehow you’ve turned him mad.”

Jhonnen shook his head. “I didn’t do anything but beat him down. His spirit broke on its own.”

Jaesa glared at him, and then her expression changed to confusion. “You spared Master Yonlach on Tatooine and my parents on Alderaan. Now... I felt Master Karr slipping toward death but you... you saved him. Your actions belie your station. Is it real, or has it all been a trick to get me to lower my guard.”
“In fairness, saving Master Karr was Baras’s idea. But saving Yonlach and your parents was mine, I don’t want to see you suffer.”

“Use your power, Jaesa!” snapped Nomen Karr. “Look into the Sith’s heart and you will see.”

“That seems fair,” Jhonnen said with a nod. “I’ve got nothing to hide in this case.”

Jaesa folded her hands together and Jhonnen felt ghostly hands reach out to examine him, he tried not to breathe.

“I see… mercy,” Jaesa said. “And fear. There’s hatred but so much of it is directed inwards. There’s fairness and compassion in you. You have walked the light path.” Jaesa lifted her head and the feeling of being probed went away. “Sparing Master Yonlach and my parents are true reflections of you, but it’s said that Sith embody darkness. How is this possible?”

“The hatred you felt is for the Sith,” Jhonnen said, feeling overexposed. “My background is… complicated. I can get into it at another time.”

“Don’t listen, Jaesa!” Nomen Karr demanded. “The Sith has disguised himself and me to cause you to doubt your power!”

“I—I don’t know what to believe!” Jaesa shouted. “You told me there was order to the galaxy. That you would show me the truth.”

Jhonnen’s heart broke for her and he hated putting her in this position.

“But nothing is true!” Jaesa complained. “Both of you are trying to drive me insane!”

“It’s Darth Baras,” insisted Nomen Karr. “He is manipulating us all. Kill the Sith! Kill Baras’s liar and you’ll see.”

“All I’ve wanted this whole time has been to talk to you,” Jhonnen said. “I have a plan to get us both out of this with our heads intact.”

“Shut up! I can’t trust you! I can’t trust anything!” Jaesa grabbed her saberstaff. “Defend yourself, Sith!”

Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers and blocked Jaesa’s initial assault. He used his lightsabers to distract her while he forced her back against one of the walls where her footwork was useless. Jhonnen slammed his head into hers, knocking her head back into a pillar and then dropped both of his lightsabers to grab the hilt of her saberstaff and force it out of her hands, hurling it across the room behind him and pinning her wrists to the wall. “I’ve spent too long trying not to hurt you to let you get either of us killed,” he snapped. “Calm down and think.”

Jaesa took a breath. “What are you talking about?”

Jhonnen let go of her wrists and stepped back. “Baras will hunt you down for a long as you remain a threat. But, if we convince him that I’ve turned you to the darkside, he’ll see you as an asset. If you switch your loyalties, we can both live.”

Jaesa stared at him. “You did all this to protect me?”

Jhonnen nodded.

“We don’t even know each other.”
“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t the right thing to do. Are you in or aren’t you?”

Jaesa sighed. “My life… doesn’t mean that much to me at the moment. But all my life I’ve put up with deceit and denial. I thought the Jedi would be different.” She looked into Jhonnen’s eyes and held them. “You’ve shown me otherwise. You’ve exposed Master Karr for what he is. It’s your power that reveals a person’s true nature. Your… stubbornness I guess, brings a reckoning that cannot be denied. I want that.”

“Then come with me. We can figure this out together.”

“Maybe I can do more good from within the Empire than without.” She looked over to Master Karr and her expression fell further. “What… what shall we do with Master Karr?”

“I can’t save Master Karr from Baras. The commandos all report back to him. I’m sorry.”

Jaesa gave Karr one last mournful look. “I don’t want to trade my life for his.”

“It’s the only trade I can make,” Jhonnen exhaled through his nose. “At this point, the only other option is killing you both.”

“This is going to be difficult, isn’t it?” Jaesa asked.

Jhonnen nodded. “We’ll keep our eyes open for an escape route, until then, the only person I would suggest you trust besides me is the twi’lek Vette aboard my ship. The Captain’s a good guy, but he’s Baras’s through and through.”

“I’ll try to find a sense of purpose, my lord.”

“Please, just call me Jhonnen if we’re alone.”

Jaesa gave him a threadbare smile. “Alright, Jhonnen. Let’s get started on this path.”

They took the speeder back to Jiguuna and a shuttle back up to the orbital where *The Sanguine Tide* was docked. Jhonnen filled Jaesa in on what she needed to know, about Baras and the crew and how apprentices were expected to behave in public. They entered the ship and Vette accosted Jhonnen the minute he was through the airlock.

“You went by yourself?”

He brought his hands up peaceably to defend himself. “It worked out, meet Jaesa, my new apprentice, or hopefully she will be once I’m allowed to have an apprentice.”

“You could have died, Jhonnen.”

“But I didn’t.” Jhonnen smiled apologetically. “Taking you or Quinn would have put you in an unbelievable amount of danger and that would have distracted me from what I needed to do. It was hard enough fighting Nomen Karr into submission without killing him, how successful do you think I would have been if he’d snapped your neck?”

Vette paused. She sighed and her lekku twitched with resigned annoyance.

“I’m sorry, Vette.”

“It’s fine. Baras’ll want you to check in.”

“Goody.”
Jhonnen made his way to the holoterminal with Jaesa and Vette on his heels. He listened idly as the girls introduced themselves, the conversation breaking up as Quinn came around from the cockpit.

“Ms. Willsaam, I presume?” Quinn looked surprised.

“Turned to darkness,” Jhonnen lied. “My plan from the beginning.” He turned on the holoterminal and sent the call out to Baras to announce his success.

Baras appeared in the holo, rubbing his hands together like a greedy child. “I have been informed that my soldiers are bringing Nomen Karr to me. A pleasant surprise.” Baras chuckled cruelly. “I’ll have the final word in my war with the Jedi. He will die a thousand deaths.”

“Why not kill him once and have done with it?” Jhonnen asked.

“Someday,” Baras said dismissively. “You may have a nemesis, and then you’ll understand.” He turned his attention onto Jaesa. “I see you have a new passenger, Jaesa Willsaam, I presume.”

“Greetings, my lord,” Jaesa said, dutifully bowing her head as Jhonnen had instructed.

“Your parents are alive and thriving here on Dromund Kaas,” Baras said clearly gunning for a reaction. “They’ll be so pleased to know you are safe.”

“Please tell them I’ve never been happier,” Jaesa lied.

Baras looked back at Jhonnen. “I sense her devotion to you, apprentice. How ever did you manage that?”

“I’m a people person.”

“Marvelous, apprentice, simply marvelous. There’s no denying you are a master of the dark arts now. Only the most accomplished among us are named as lords among Sith. You have more than earned the distinction. I hereby confer the title of Sith Lord upon you.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Jhonnen said, feeling sick to his stomach. He now shared a rank with Vitreous.

But it was another step closer to the bastard’s death. Another step nearer to revenge.

“I award a considerable stipend to those who attain such rank in my service. Enjoy it. Now, celebrate as you see fit, then return to me here on Dromund Kaas. I have great plans for us.”

The holo went dark and Jhonnen turned to face his crew. Vette smiled at him. “Wow, a lord. I’m impressed.”

Quinn bowed his head. “Congratulations, my lord.”

“Thanks, both of you. I couldn’t have done this without you in a very real and tangible sense.”

“Service is it’s own reward,” said Quinn.

Vette rolled her eyes. “Yeah, what he said.”

Jhonnen cleared his throat. “With the promotion comes the ability to claim my own apprentice, in this case, Jaesa.”
“I already prepared her quarters,” Vette said, pushing off the side of the sofa she was leaning on. “I’ll go ahead and show her to them.”

“Thanks Vette. We’ll head to Dromund Kaas immediately. I think I’m gonna need a larger apartment.”

Vette and Jaesa headed off and Quinn cleared his throat for Jhonnen’s attention. “So, my lord, now you have the girl. A victory, I dare say, even Baras failed to anticipate.”

It didn’t sound like a compliment, Jhonnen’s shoulders stiffened.

“I’m a bit perplexed,” continued Quinn. “Your methods have been rather… unorthodox to this point.”

“I think they were more effective than the alternative, don’t you think?” Jhonnen asked. “We won’t get very far if our only methods are brute-forcing our way through every complication, sometimes a gentler hand is, I don’t know, warranted.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, my lord. And now I leave you to enjoy this achievement.” Quinn headed back towards the cockpit.

Jhonnen returned to his room and curled up on his mattress. Things were only more complicated from this point forward.
Jhonnen waited outside while Jaesa visited her parents, feeling out of place. He’d only accompanied her because she didn’t know Kaas City well-enough to get around on her own. Jhonnen remembered the scent of death sticks and fruit perfume. Moments like this he wondered if things might have been better if Isixia hadn’t run. If they’d never fled he could visit her when they returned to the city. See her again. Talk to her again.

But if she hadn’t raised him herself on Nar Shaddaa, he would likely be a very different person. And probably not a better person.

The door to the Willsaam’s apartment opened and Jaesa stepped outside. “Sorry to keep you waiting, master.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Jhonnen when it’s just us and Vette, My lord when it’s around anybody else.”

Jaesa shrugged and he could tell she wasn’t going to take it to heart.

“They alright?” He asked, changing the topic and gesturing to the apartment with his head.

“They’re happy,” Jaesa said, folding her hands in front of her. “Thank you for sparing them.”

“I’m just glad it worked. We should get back to the ship and see what Baras wants. Besides, I sent Vette along ahead and she and Quinn don’t really get on.”

Jaesa nodded and called the elevator that would take them down to the ground floor. Outside they took a taxi back to the spaceport, staring out their separate windows, knee deep in their separate thoughts.

Isixia had never loved Kaas City. He couldn’t really picture her in the perpetual rain, or standing beneath blocky grey buildings. Isixia had blended into the sleaze and glitter of Nar Shaddaa’s Red Light District. She had been trashy and she had leaned into it. He had loved that about her. He had loved so much about her.

They reached the spaceport and the hangar where The Sanguine Tide was waiting. Vette was leaning against the landing gear.

“Hey,” she raised one hand off her folded arms in greeting.

“Hey,” Jhonnen said in return. “Quinn already aboard?”

“I’m not convinced he hasn’t been sleeping here.” Vette rolled her eyes and pushed off the landing gear, heading up into the ship with Jaesa and Jhonnen on their heels.

“My lord,” Quinn inclined his head businesslike. “We’re ready for take off at your leisure.”
“Let’s do it then,” Jhonnen sighed. “Baras wanted us in orbit before I called him.”

“At once, my lord.”

Jhonnen waited until they were in orbit before calling Darth Baras. The Sith lord appeared in the holo. “Ah,” he said fondly. “The latest lord in the Emperor’s arsenal returns. You’re just in time—I have need of you.”

Jhonnen nodded. He knew that. He’d received instructions to that end.

“My master on the Dark Council, Darth Vengean, wants war. Not petty skirmishes that tiptoe around the Treaty of Coruscant, but open warfare.”

This sounded like a terrible idea.

“Vengean has tasked me with finding a way to compel the rest of the Council to tear up the Treaty.”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose to keep from sighing. “Shouldn’t take much, the Jedi are perpetually spoiling for a fight and the Empire and the Republic both keep pushing.”

“I may have found an opportunity that will have the Council and the Emperor ready to act. Most think that our inability to find and defeat one man—General Karastace Gonn—kept us from outright victory and forced the negotiated peace.”

“I have no idea who that it.”

“Yes,” said Baras bitterly. “Even as the Republic writes songs about him, we would just as soon forget he exists. General Gonn operated from the shadows, a phantom single-handedly preventing the fringe systems from falling to us. After years without a hint of his whereabouts, I’ve learned that he’s meeting on Nar Shaddaa with traitorous Imperial agents. You will go there, and you will kill him.”

“Seems straightforward enough.”

Baras was not impressed. “Ordering his death is an act rife with political consequence. Take it seriously.”

Jhonnen did not enjoy taking things seriously. Things were generally dire enough without his help.

“Without Gonn, the fringe systems will fall. Control of the outlying planets will be a great advantage.” Baras drew himself up to his full height. “So, to Nar Shaddaa. And deliver Darth Vengean’s red carpet to war.” The holo flickered and went silent.

Jhonnen sighed. He headed to the cockpit. “Quinn?”

“My lord.”

“Set course for Nar Shaddaa.”

“At once, my lord.”

Jhonnen ducked back out of the cockpit and went to check on how Jaesa was settling into her new quarters. They hadn’t spent much time on *the Tide* since her recruitment.

She was meditating, folded up on the floor of her room. She looked up at him and Jhonnen came in
“Master,” she said. “I feel compelled to tell you, I’m uneasy fighting alongside diehard Imperials.”

“Quinn’s not all bad,” Jhonnen said. “He’s smart, strong, brave and loyal.” Albeit mostly loyal to Baras.

“It seems like a foolish risk, we are always surrounded by the enemy. If your ruse is discovered and it’s revealed that I’m no sith apprentice, what will we do? What will happen?”

Jhonnen frowned. “Nothing good, which is why we work not to be discovered until we find a good out. Just… don’t bring it up unless we’re in private.”

“This work is so grim,” Jaesa complained gently. “And I must learn to play the part of the dark apprentice. I’ve always despised those who pretend to be what they are not. Now it seems I’ve joined their ranks.”

“Just for a little while,” Jhonnen promised. “While we’re both alive we can figure this out. In the meantime, try and find something to distract yourself.”

“I’ll try, Master.”

“Jhonnen,” Jhonnen corrected fruitlessly. “I’ll be in my room if you need anything.”

He headed to his room and kicked off his shoes before flopping on his back on the bed. It wouldn’t be a long flight to Nar Shaddaa. Mostly he was concerned about undermining the Treaty. They’d need a scapegoat at the end of it and as the lowest ranking person and the one doing the dirty work, it felt probable that his name would come up.

A knock interrupted his thoughts.

“Come in.”

The door whooshed open and he rolled to sitting, offering Vette a thin smile.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

She stepped inside and the door closed behind her, Jhonnen turned on a light.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Nothing crazy,” she assured him, holding a hand up. “Just thinking about what happened back on Nar Shaddaa with the old gang.” Her smile dimmed a little bit. “When I saw Taunt flirting with you, I don’t know. It was weird.”

“It was weird for me too. I don’t generally have pretty girls flirting with me. Usually the pretty girl is running circles around my enemies.”

Vette smiled, snorting a little as she chuckled. “You’re so weird.”

“As long as I’m weird in an amusing way and not in a creepy way, I’m happy with that.”

“Definitely amusing,” she assured him. She leaned back against the door. “You know, stand-in family is all well and good, but seeing the old gang just made me miss my mom and sister.”
Jhonnen could relate, seeing her with the old gang had just made him miss Kira and miss her desperately.

“Which is sort of weird,” Vette continued. “My memories are so old, I remember having the memories more than I remember the actual events.” She frowned. “Did that make any sense?”

Jhonnen nodded. “It made sense. Why don’t you tell me about them?”

Vette’s expression darkened. “Someday I’ll have to do something more than talk, I suppose. Right now I just think, what would Tivva be like today? The last time I saw my sister she was ten? Twelve?” Vette shook her head. “Okay, enough of that. Moving along. Who are you taking with you to deal with the General?”

Jhonnen frowned. “I… hadn’t actually thought about it.”

“You should take Jaesa. It takes time to learn how to fight next to someone and you two are going to be in closer quarters than Captain No-Fun or I.”

“That’s a good thought, Vette. I’ll do that.”

Vette hit the door and left the room, leaving Jhonnen to his thoughts once more. They lingered on her, rather than returning to the past. Vette was a singular woman and he was lucky to have her. She stood up under the worst pressure with a truly indomitable spirit. He envied her that, feeling that his own spirit had broken long ago. She was quick-witted and wielded her barbed tongue like a weapon.

All he could do was shelter her from the worst that the Empire had to offer.

And some days, days like today, he wondered if that was enough.

Jaesa had, unsurprisingly, never been to Nar Shaddaa before. She was at once mesmerized and horrified as Jhonnen lead her past the spectacles of life on the Smuggler’s Moon. People openly selling Spice or bartering for slaves. People being held at blaster point by order of the Hutts or some gangster.

“How are you so calm?” Jaesa asked as she slid into the taxi beside him. “This place is awful.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I used to be from here,” he told her. “It’s much the same as it was back then. I had a similar culture shock to Alderaan.”

“No one was selling Spice on the street corners.”

“Or organs.” Jhonnen said.

“Or what?”

“Yeah, the organ trade was big in my neighborhood growing up.”

Jaesa recoiled.

“But the Alderaanian Nobility waged their private wars within their own households and got everyone else stepped on.”

Jaesa frowned but didn’t argue.
“Your parents said you were going to marry into the nobility? That that was going to get them out of slavery?”

“Servitude,” she corrected. “And, yes,” Jaesa looked out the window. “I... attracted the attention of a young lord. Everyone would have gotten what they wanted.”

“I’m sorry the Jedi took you away from true love then,” Jhonnen said awkwardly.

Jaesa shook her head. “I liked him well enough, but he wasn’t the thing I missed when Master Karr took me away.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Familial duty?”

Jaesa nodded.

Jhonnen frowned and couldn’t say ‘well, at least you don’t have to worry about that any more’. Whether she’d been eager or not didn’t matter any more. She was now irrevocably tied to his legacy, as his apprentice. Her parents, as Force-Blind outsiders, no longer mattered in terms of “familial duty.”

Jhonnen had never thought about that before. The way inheritance worked in the Empire, the careful cultivation of Force powers throughout the Empire, the introduction of powerful apprentices and Force sensitive children. The intricate dance of bloodline and birthright alongside the line of of masters and their apprentices.

He had tied Jaesa into this mess. And there was nothing he could do to apologize. Sith inheritances were banthashit.

He had wronged Jaesa Willsaam by stealing her away, and now he just kept wronging her to keep her safe and it made him deeply uncomfortable.

They took the taxi to Upper Industrial Sector where Gonn was supposed to be meeting with the traitors. To his own annoyance, Jhonnen had to admit that Baras’s information web seemed to be effective.

Sure enough, by following Baras’s information they found the safe house where the General was meeting with a chiss agent, almost certainly the traitor that Baras had told Jhonnen about.

Jhonnen leaned in the doorway, listening and waiting for someone to notice him as the chiss (Fawste, apparently) informed the General that a Jedi Knight named Xerender had landed safely on Hoth.

“You are a valuable asset to the Republic, Fawste,” said the General. “Some day, the rest of the chiss will follow your lead.”

“I mean, probably not,” Jhonnen said, breaking his silence. “Hiya.”

The few republic troopers present rallied around their general.

“Protect our allies as well,” said the General. “I think I can guess who you are, Sith. For all of Darth Baras’s covert manipulations, you have banged around the galaxy rather loudly.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “It’s what he pays me for. Are you going to surrender or does this have to go the hard way?”
“I’ll have to be more careful moving forward, but keeping the fringe systems free of the Empire is more important than my life.”

Jhonnen sighed. Just occasionally he would like someone to surrender. Just for the novelty of it if nothing else.

“Sith…” said Fawste, looking nervous. “You are Darth Baras’s apprentice? We—we know of you. This, uh, isn’t what it seems.”

“Oh really?” Jhonnen said skeptically. “Because it seems like treason, something I’m supposed to take a dim view of.”

It was a really good thing Quinn wasn’t there, thought Jhonnen. Quinn would notice the supposed to and get offended.

“We, uh, cooperated with General Gonn in order to learn, uh, what he was up to,” Fawste said, clearly pulling a story out of his ass. “So that at the right time, we could, uh, betray him.”

Well at least Fawste had a clear picture of who was going to win.

“Nicely played, Fawste,” said General Gonn, offended for some reason when the chiss was clearly just covering his own ass. “You’re a true lowlife. When this is over, so is our alliance.”

“I’d still like to avoid killing anyone if possible,” said Jhonnen. “Just throwing that out there if anyone does feel like surrendering. Anyone?”

“Never!” shouted the General. “Men, take these Sith down!”

Jhonnen deflected a blaster bolt and bit back on saying there was only one Sith because it felt like they were slandering Jaesa. He couldn’t though, because it might get back to somebody.

Jhonnen leapt into the fray, closing with the General’s guards while Jaesa distracted the man himself. Fawste and his men cowered in a back corner until a winner was decided with Jhonnen stabbing the General in the spine while his attention was on Jaesa.

Jhonnen sighed and looked at Fawste.

Fawste trembled and cleared his throat. “You… you killed them all. Please, mercy. I—we will rededicate ourselves to the Empire.”

“What did you do?” Jhonnen asked, suspecting that whatever it was it would find a way to bite him, personally, in the ass.

“I—I helped a Jedi land on Hoth undetected. I believe he’s searching for something in the starship graveyard wreckage. But that’s all I know.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Back to work then, and knock off this treason stuff or someone will make me come back here and you do not want to see my face again. Got it?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Fawste left with his men and Jaesa gave Jhonnen a smile. “I’m glad you spared them.”

“Quinn’ll shoot me if he ever finds out, so don’t tell him, alright?”

“Understood, Master.”
Jhonnen sighed and resisted the urge to shake her while repeating his first name on a loop. They returned to the ship without pomp or ceremony, Jaesa returning to her room to meditate and Jhonnen heading to the cockpit to tell Quinn to lay in a course to Dromund Kaas so they could see what Baras wanted from him next.

Jhonnen took Quinn with him to meet with Darth Baras. Quinn was the only member of the crew he wasn’t actively trying to shield from Baras, after all, and probably Quinn appreciated the attention. Jhonnen hoped, anyway.

“My lord,” Quinn said as they waited for the taxi. “If you have a moment?”

“I always have time for you, Quinn,” Jhonnen said evenly, turning to watch the Captain instead of the endless, incessant, rain.

“I’d appreciate it if you could speak with Vette,” Quinn said. “Ask her not to disturb me when I’m working.”

Jhonnen puzzled. “What’s she been doing, exactly?”

“She’s not wired for military precision. And there’s no filter on that twi’lek mouth.”

Jhonnen gave him a brief, warning glower.

Quinn exhaled, and continued. “When I was tracking down agent Voloren, she must have overhead me refer to Moff Broysc, and now she persistently pesters me about him. She keeps slipping his name nonsensically into conversations just to annoy me. Says she won’t stop until I tell her why I hate the man.”

“She’s not going to stop,” Jhonnen said. “But she might just be trying to get to know you, maybe make friends?”

Vette was absolutely not trying to make friends with Quinn, but Jhonnen could dream, couldn’t he? And maybe if he got Quinn to extend a hand first…

“With her? My lord, please.”

Well there goes that.

“It’s neither appropriate nor in the Empire’s interest to discuss the matter with non-military personnel,” Quinn explained. Leaving out that Jhonnen was technically non-military personnel, though he was Quinn’s direct superior, he supposed. “Besides, knowing her, the details of Broysc’s collapse at Druckenwell and his and my subsequent conflict would only give her more fodder.”

“That’s… probably true,” Jhonnen conceded. “I’ll ask her to leave you alone.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Quinn as the taxi arrived. “It’s appreciated.”

They headed to the Sanctum and, once there, proceeded down to Baras’s chambers. Baras was in the inner office on the holo with an older looking Sith lord. Given the somewhat deferential nature with which Baras was speaking, Jhonnen guess it was his master. Darth Vengean.

Darth Vengean, and indeed every member of the Dark Council, was one of the last people Jhonnen wanted taking an interest in him or his extra curricular activities. Which at the moment consisted of sheltering a jedi padawan until he could safely return her to the Republic.
Assuming the Jedi would even take her back, now that she was ‘tainted’. Like animals neglecting their young after a person had touched them.

He leaned against the wall and waited to be noticed because he was absolutely not interrupting a conversation between a pair of Darths.

“Baras, are you responsible? Was it you who took out General Gonn?”

“It was, Lord Vengean,” Baras gave a small bow. “The fringe systems are ripe for the taking.”

“Such an advantage will prod the rest of the Council out of passivity. They will see—war is the only answer. You have delivered to me what I most crave.”

“I will always serve you to the full extent of my abilities, master.” Baras gave a lower bow.

Jhonnen didn’t believe it for an instant. Baras served Baras’s interests and no one else’s, like most Sith. But the lie wasn’t for him and he didn’t feel the need to point it out. It wasn’t like it was an unusual lie.

“Who stands by eavesdropping?” snapped Vengean. “I do not like to be observed.”

Shit, thought Jhonnen, catching the swear in his throat before he actually said it. He and Quinn left the shadows to enter the office together.

“My lord,” said Baras. “This is my most distinguished apprentice. And the deliverer of General Gonn’s death.”

Jhonnen, self-preservation instinct kicking in, gave a low bow, pleased to note that Quinn did the same. He thought about introducing Quinn and then thought better about it. Powerful Sith didn’t care about Captains. They were too far up their own ass about promotions.

“I see. Funny you haven’t mentioned this one. You, apprentice, by serving Baras, you serve me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord,” the words were heavy on Jhonnen tongue but they would allow him to keep his neck a little longer.

“Good.” Vengean turned his attention back to Baras. “It is time, I will send my destroyer to the fringe systems, and they will be mine before anyone is the wiser. The order is given, Baras. Enact Plan Zero. Vengean out.”

Baras bowed until the holo was dark and then turned to Jhonnen and Quinn. “Excellent. I have waited a long time for this order. Apprentice, Plan Zero is the systematic elimination of the Republic’s top military leaders. A preemptive strike that will leave the enemy headless.”

Jhonnen nodded, privately concerned. He didn’t want the galaxy to erupt into warfare. A lot of people who didn’t deserve it got fucked over by a war. And pretty much nobody deserved it but the top brass and people like Baras who were instrumental in making the war happen.

“There’s no time to waste. Make ready your ship. I will contact you there.”

Jhonnen returned to his ship as ordered and left Dromund Kaas, lingering in orbit for the holocall from Baras. His expression was grim as he tried to work out the best way to tell Jaesa that they were apparently going to be instrumental in starting a war with her home. Alderaan was neutral
now but the Organas had never seen it that way, and the planet had only been neutral for about a
decade.

“You alright?” Vette asked. Her hand alighting on his arm for a bare second before she withdrew. Jhonnen would have killed someone to prolong the grounding contact, but instead he just shrugged. “Baras’ll fill everyone in in a minu—there he is.”

Jhonnen turned on the holo and looked up at Baras expectantly.

“Apprentice,” said Baras. “Your targets are the Republic’s six most important military leaders. There are two I must still locate—Admiral Monk, who commands the Republic fleet, and Jedi Knight Xerender, who leads an elite squad of commandos.”

Xerender was on Hoth, according to Fawste meeting with General Gonn, but Jhonnen felt no compulsion to volunteer the information. The slower this went the longer he had to think of some way out of it or get Jaesa home before they got in too deep.

“But the other targets,” continued Baras. “The four generals of the Republic’s strategic command, a confirmed to be on the planet Taris. You must speed there immediately.”

“Okay,” Jhonnen nodded. “I’ll head there now.”

Taris was primarily Republic controlled, right? Maybe he could discreetly drop Jaesa off somewhere. He couldn’t ask her to fight a war like this. Not on this side anyway.

“I will give you the particulars of you mission when you arrive. Baras out.”

The holo went dark and for a long moment everyone was silent until Vette said, “huh.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement.

Jaesa, standing in the entrance to her room having watched the holo said, “that will start a war, master.”

“Yes.” Jhonnen said, staring at the place Baras had been. “Which is the intention. Quinn?”

“Yes, my lord?” Quinn said, rounding the corner out of the cockpit.

“Set course for Taris. I will be in my room.”

“I’ll come too,” Vette said. She gave Jhonnen a thin smile. “You look tense.”

Jhonnen wasn’t about to argue, though he did look surprised when Vette closed the door behind him. He settled sitting on the edge of the bed. “What’s up?”

“You just look rough. I know you’re worried about Jaesa and you’re hiding things from Quinn, so I figured I would see if you needed to talk this through.”

Jhonnen gave her an adoring look that he almost managed to mask as mere fondness. “You know, with you closing the door they’re probably going to assume we’re fucking.”

Vette shrugged. “That might give us the opening we need to talk in private.”

“You’re devious.”

She smiled. “I know.”
“This does remind me that I’m supposed to ask you to leave Quinn alone about the Broysc stuff.”

Vette rolled her eyes.

“Would it kill you to leave Quinn alone?”

Vette gave a jaunty shrug. “It might. I could keel over and die immediately.”

“While we can’t have that, he’s complained through official channels and I told him I’d talk to you about it.” Jhonnen rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “Why do you care, anyway?”

“Because I don’t trust him.” Vette curled up on her side on his opposite pillow so they could speak without any risk of being overhead. Unbidden rose thoughts of Tatooine and her cheek against his chest. Jhonnen pushed the thoughts aside as Vette continued to explain. “He’s loyal to Baras, not to you. What if he finds out about Jaesa? What if he finds out about you.”

Jhonnen’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “I’ll kill him before I let him hurt anyone. But can you lay off him a little bit. I don’t need him getting all twitchy.”

“Fine,” Vette shrugged. “But only because you asked nicely.”

Jhonnen closed his eyes. “If I take a nap, will you stay?”

Vette chuckled a little. “Yeah. Why not?”
War Trust Worthy

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen is sent to Taris to deal with the fabled War Trust, a collection of Republic Generals, in order to break open the Treaty of Coruscant like a clam.

“My lord,” Quinn said when Jhonnen entered the cockpit to check their heading. “I seek advice.”

Jhonnen blinked, personally feeling that he was the last person anyone should go to for advice. Just as a matter of principle. “Alright, Quinn, what do you need?”

Quinn stood up so he was addressing Jhonnen face-to-neck. Quinn was a good head-and-shoulders taller than the Sith lord. “As a military man, above all else, I value discipline, the chain of command, and uncompromising dedication to serving the Empire’s interest. But there’s a built in dilemma. When my instincts tell me that a superior is jeopardizing the Empire, it makes my path less clear.”

This sounded like it was about to be a complaint about Jhonnen. Which was… fair… all things considered, though it left Jhonnen in a difficult place regarding his protection of Jaesa.

“Well, I think you should always speak your mind about that sort of thing. So, what aspect of my operation brought this up?” He tried to say it lightly, almost teasingly.

“You mistake me,” Quinn said, shaking his head. “My concern is about the legacy of my former commander.”

“No one is above reproach, or at least they shouldn’t be. It’s our job to speak up when something’s wrong.” He felt like a lying hypocrite for saying it when he never stood up against Baras.

“That has been a difficult lesson to learn.” Quinn admitted. “But it’s tricky. The criteria to challenge a superior must never be softened. I stood by as Moff Broysc’s random whims compromised countless missions. It is a mistake I refuse to repeat.”

Jhonnen worried even as he nodded his approval. Quinn was right. And unfortunately this was probably, eventually, going to put them at odds with one another.

“Defying him ruined my career,” Quinn said. “But I should have done it sooner. No matter the consequences.”

Jhonnen didn’t think he had ever admired a man more than he admired Quinn in that moment. And that wasn’t helped by the determination in Quinn’s icy blue eyes or the firm set of his jaw.

Quinn, in that moment, made him want to believe in the Empire.

“Seems to me, Broysc gave you the kick in the ass you needed to become the most focused and exacting soldier I’ve ever met. I should get him a card.”

Quinn cracked a rare and tiny smile. “That is a startling perspective, my lord. Your example and insight give me clarity. Thank you. I am more focused now.”
“You’re always focused. I’ve got no complaints.”

Quinn’s tiny smile grew a little. “I’ll never give you a reason for them, my lord. I won’t take up any more of your time.”

Jhonnen left the cockpit. He knocked on Jaesa’s door and entered when she beckoned him. Jaesa was kneeling on the floor near the bed, around her the Force swelled, almost too bright to look at. She exhaled and pulled all the light within.

“You’re getting better at masking it,” Jhonnen praised. “Not that I think you’re ready for Baras’s scrutiny or anything, but when you turn it all inwards you look like just… a person.” Which was an incredibly stupid way to put it. “What I mean is, I could teach you to channel the dark side, just enough to use it as a masking screen.”

Jaesa frowned at him. “Master Karr told me to avoid such temptations.”

“Then Master Karr was a hypocrite. Channeling the dark side is the only way he infiltrated the Sith. I can’t see into someone’s… soul… the way you can. But I can tell when they’re using the light side of the force.”

Jaesa’s shoulders slumped with defeat. “Show me.”

Jhonnen moved to her side and the knelt down the way she was. “With the dark side, power comes from your emotions. Digging in and pulling them out. I… tend to channel hate a lot. But you don’t have to. Fear, anger, passion, sorrow, those are all pretty common too.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you channel hate. You seem… you’re a good person.”

“I have daddy issues like mother fuck,” Jhonnen said with a little shrug. “My hate drives most of my actions. Even now, I serve Baras so I can get the power I need to murder Lord Vitreous and avenge my mother and myself.”

Jaesa frowned. “I… I’m angry,” she admitted like it was a deep and terrible secret. “At my parents, for using me to advance their station. At Master Karr for lying to me. I’m just…”

“So focus on it. Feel it. And let that feeling turn to power.”

They meditated for an hour, Jhonnen guiding Jaesa through the minefield that was the dark side. But when he looked at her, he saw the familiar tendrils of a red so dark it was nearly black.

“I’ve reached Taris,” Jhonnen said to Baras’s holo.

“Excellent,” Baras replied. “Your mission on Taris is to take down the Republic’s entire Strategic High Command. The War Trust—the four generals who implement the bulk of the Republic military force’s strategic planning—are all on Taris as we speak. Normally they’re never together in one place. This is an incredible opportunity.”

“Okay, so why are they all in one place? It must be important.”

“Truthfully, I don’t care about the agenda—the War Trust generals themselves are the true threat. Generals Faraire, Minst, Durant and Frellka should not be taken lightly. Each will likely be protected by his own elite guard, and they have all the Republic forces on Taris at their disposal.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen said with a small sigh. It probably did matter what the generals were up to, but he
wasn’t going to argue with Baras about it. He wasn’t going to argue with Baras about *anything* if he could help it.

“This will likely be the largest scale assault you have ever undertaken. Moff Hurden leads the Imperial forces on the planet. He will provide whatever resources he can. Shuttle to the surface and seek him out. Immediately.”

The holo went out and Jhonnen popped his neck. He hit the intercom and called together his small crew offered a brief, thin smile to all of them. “So the plan is to hit the surface and take out the four generals of the War Trust. *However,* I did the reading about Taris and I want Quinn and Jaesa to stay parked up here if possible.”

Quinn stood a little straighter. “My lord, I have the most experience with Imperial forces. I feel I could be *invaluable* to you on the surface.”

“You’re probably right, but I’m not willing to risk you or Jaesa to the rakghoul virus. Vette and I aren’t susceptible to it.”

“We are susceptible to being mauled,” Vette reminded him. “I’m with you, just don’t want that to be forgotten.”

“It wasn’t. But we’re a good team and we’re good at not being mauled.”

Vette smiled a little. “Let me get my gear and I’ll meet you at the airlock.”

Jhonnen nodded.

He waited for her at the airlock and together they headed through the orbital and took the shuttle down to the surface. Vette nudged his knee with hers, and he nudged her back. There was a calm in his system when Vette was near. Less like he felt she’d take charge of the situation, as had been the case with Kira, but more like whatever trouble he found himself in, she’d help him climb out of.

She made him miss Kira like mad. He’d catch himself wondering if they would have liked one another. He got to sleep some nights picturing them both picking on him fondly.

They landed and headed into the base to meet with Moff Hurdenn. He was a small, mousy man with a small, mousy mustache. He seemed even smaller than he was by virtue of the *towering* commando standing near at hand. An absolute mountain of a man with short red hair shaved in lines and a thick, but well maintained, red beard.

“Moff Hurdenn,” he said, looking up from a datapad when Jhonnen entered. The side of his face was covered in fading scars. “The Sith is here.”

“What’s that Lieutenant?” asked the Moff. He looked at Jhonnen and stepped back as though surprised before recovering. “Oh, I didn’t see you come in. You must be the Sith Darth Baras sent. Welcome to Taris.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Jhonnen said, hoping manners would make things go faster. “What information do you have for me?”

“I have never had cause to assist Darth Baras before,” said the Moff. “But I have long been an admirer of his work, and yours, of course.”

“I doubt he came all this way to be fawned on.” The mountain of a man said, folding his arms over
his chest.

“Of course. May I introduce Lieutenant Pierce, on loan from one of our notorious black ops divisions. He is hands down my finest officer.” Hurdenn seemed almost deferential towards Pierce and it set Jhonnen’s nerves on edge. “I give you exclusive reign of him while you’re on Taris, which I trust will accommodate your every need.”

“Works for me,” Jhonnen shrugged.

“Good,” said Pierce with a little nod.

“Yes,” Moff Hurdenn cleared his throat. “Well, I will leave the two of you to your mission, then. As you proceed, if I can offer any further air, do not hesitate to contact me.” Hurdenn wandered off and Pierce turned to Jhonnen.

Jhonnen, who already thought that Quinn was tall, had to crane his neck a little to look Pierce in the eye. He marked him as well over six foot.

“Heard we’re going after the War Trust,” Pierce said. “Did some homework. If that is the mission, I’m fully prepped.”

“Nice, that saves on time,” Jhonnen replied.

“All four of the War Trust generals are here on Taris, which means something big. But they never show their faces. Got my hands on a Republic scout, leaned on him. Hard. He was setting up supply routes for General Frellka, the War Trust’s junior member.”

Jhonnen nodded. He didn’t condone torture but there was no profit in bringing that up now. It wouldn’t un-torture the guy and it would just make this Lieutenant think he was soft.

Given the air between him and Hurdenn? Jhonnen absolutely could not let Lieutenant Pierce think he was soft.

“The story checked out,” Pierce continued. “Been scoping the area the scout described. Several heavily armed Republic supply caravans run along carefully staggered routes. Couple dozen soldiers could hit the caravans, pull their transponders, triangulate their destination with the equipment here. Moff Hurdenn can’t spare the manpower though.”

“Can you handle the equipment? Because I’m betting Vette and I can hit the caravans.”

“Not really my thing, but I’m trained,” replied Pierce. “Here are the coordinates. Caravans run daily, but they vary the timing. I’m sure you’ll come upon them eventually. Hit enough and snag the transponders. I’ll figure out where they’re going. Should zero in on General Frellka.”

Jhonnen nodded and he and Vette left.

“Couple dozen soldiers,” Vette said warily.

Jhonnen forced a casual shrug. “We’re better then they are.”

“If I die, I’m going to haunt you.”

“That’s fair,” Jhonnen conceded. “If I die I’m probably going to just lay there complaining. So at least your plan is more productive.”

Vette snorted a laugh.
They grabbed the last transponder and sent the data to Pierce. He took a moment to retrace their routes and find the common denominator. Pierce sent back the coordinates and Jhonnen and Vette proceeded into a mine. Most of the workers were smart, they saw a red sith and an armed twi’lek and they took off running. A couple tried to be heroes and Jhonnen had no choice but to cut them down. They went to the bottom of the mine and the foreman held his hands up in surrender.

“Woah, whoa, whoa. We ain’t fighters, just miners. Contracted miners at that.”

“Where is General Frellka?” asked Jhonnen.

“He’s the overseer, but he ain’t exactly hands-on— hasn’t been by in weeks. You gonna kill him?”

“And if I say yes?” Jhonnen asked, cocking his brow.

“The Republic don’t pay me enough to get in your way, believe me. If I hit the silent alarm, Frellka’ll come with his personal guard. If that’s really what you want, I can bring him here.”

“Relax,” Jhonnen advised. “You’re not on my hit list, take a minute to breathe.”

The foreman looked uncomfortable, but nodded. “I’m gonna trust you on that.” He looked over to one of his miners and nodded. The miner hit the silent alarm. “There, it’s done. The general’s been summoned. Now, please, just let us live.”

“You’re free to go,” Jhonnen gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “I’d hurry.”

Once the miners were out, Jhonnen and Vette set about to waiting. She hopped on top of an oil drum within sight of the entrance. “So, what were you like before you were a big bad sith lord?”

Jhonnen laughed. “Am I a big bad sith lord?” He grinned at her and then his smile dimmed a little. “I was thirteen. And a pretty average thirteen for Nar Shaddaa. I was a part time pickpocket, I used my Force powers to help with small scale break-ins and impressing the girl I was friends with.”

“Just friends?”

For once, it didn’t hurt to think about Kira. For once, talking about her felt… normal. “I had a bit of a crush I guess, but we were just friends. She taught me to use the Force at first.”

“She was Force sensitive?”

“And amazing. You would have either loved her or hated her, there is no in-between.”

Vette smiled. “She sounds like a handful.”

“You wouldn’t believe.”

“Enemy sighted!” announced an older human male. “Captain, attack pattern aught-seven-seven.”

Vette hopped off the oil drum she’d been sitting on and Jhonnen stopped leaning against the crates beside it.

“Men!” said a different human male wearing captain’s stripes. “Fan out! Aught-seven-seven! Be ready to engage, wait for the general’s order!”

The general narrowed his eyes at Jhonnen. “Foremen Varl was picked up and confessed a Sith was here. So, I was able to bring backup.”
“No good deed,” muttered Jhonnen as an aside to Vette.

“I am General Elaxis Frellka of the Republic Strategic High Command. Your incursion here violates the spirit of the Treaty of Coruscant. We have you dead to rights, surrender.”

“Could be violating the spirit of your mother for all I care. I’m here for you and you alone.”

Vette snorted a laugh.

Frellka glowered but otherwise didn’t rise to the comment. “It’s unfortunate you’ve discovered our plans, but no matter. The wheels are already in motion. Our new technology will deliver arms superiority to the Republic. And I’m ready to give my life to defend this installation.”

Baras didn’t care about the technology and... wouldn’t it just be fitting if that bit him in the ass. If Jhonnen learned nothing about the tech and the Republic used it to kick the shit out of the Empire.

Sure, that might kill Jhonnen.

But wouldn’t it be apt?

“Surrender and live, old man,” Jhonnen said.

“Ha!” laughed Frellka. “Maybe you missed it, but I’ve come with more than enough force to stop you. I can’t let you leave and tell the Empire what you’ve seen. Men, this Sith must not be allowed to reveal our—”

Jhonnen closed the Force around Frellka’s throat, holding his concentration until he was fired upon and had to drop his hands to his lightsabers to deflect the bolts. Vette took cover behind the oil drum and took pot shots at the soldiers while Jhonnen sprang between them, moving fast enough to keep anyone from getting a bead on him until he was in front of Frellka. His lightsaber went through the general’s gun and then the other went through his hips. Frellka fell in pieces and the one remaining grunt broke ranks and ran.

Jhonnen walked back over to Vette. “Nicked at all?”

“I’m good.”

They checked the computer and Jhonnen purposefully ignored any details about Project Siantide but did glean General Minst’s location. He set the computer to self-destruct, and ran after Vette out of the mine.

Outside, Jhonnen pulled out his comm to contact Lieutenant Pierce while Vette grabbed her knees and gulped in air. “Lieutenant Pierce, I know where to find General Minst. I’m heading there now.”

“Great news,” said Pierce. “I’ve got some, too. Scout report. The battalion of War Trust General Durant is on the move. Odds are he’s fortifying his position. Some of my black ops pals are back. We could have discreetly followed the battalion to find the general.”

“Could have? Why didn’t you?”

Pierce looked profoundly annoyed. “Moff Hurdenn sent a platoon instead, grounded me and the boys. His forces are engaging Durant’s as we speak. He’s killing our chances.”

Jhonnen groaned. This mission was banthashit enough with the Moff fucking things over. “Put
Hurdenn on now and I’ll try to straighten this out.”

“My lord,” Pierce said.

The comm flickered and Hurdenn replaced Pierce. “Ah, there you are. I see Lieutenant Pierce has already hailed you. I was hoping to do it myself. Can I assume the Lieutenant has updated you? Thanks to me, General Durant’s personal battalion will not be joining him wherever he is.”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose, remembering that he couldn’t just snap at a Moff. “You’ve done well, Moff Hurdenn, now pull back and allow Pierce and his black ops members to follow the battalion back to the General.”

“Yes, well, of course. I’ll make it so immediately, my lord.”

The comm flickered and Pierce reappeared. “We’ll get something on Durant. I swear it. Good luck with General Minst.”

Minst was hiding in a reactor in the old transport station that was crowded with rakghouls. Jhonnen tore through the mindless, violent creatures, darting ahead of Vette to clear a threat and then running back until they reached the reactor itself. They took out the droids and guards and disabled the shields so they could reach him.

“Did I ever mention I have a fear of dying from radiation exposure,” Vette said idly.

“You did not,” Jhonnen replied. “I also have a fear of you dying from radiation exposure. Who would have guessed?”

They mounted the ramp to where the rhodian general was waiting with a couple of commandos. Jhonnen held his lightsabers threateningly at his sides. “Hiya.”

<< For the good of the Republic, men, attack the intruder! >>

Jhonnen rolled out of the way of blaster fire and came up on his feet to trip the first guard and use the momentum of the guy’s fall to hurl him into his buddy before jamming his lightsaber through the both of them and advancing on General Minst. “Do you want to try that again?” he asked.

<< Wow… you just took them both down. Uh. I am General Mindst. If you’ve come for Project Siantide, let’s, uh—let’s talk about this. >>

“I have very little interest in your weapons project.”

<< He doesn’t… I—I don’t believe you! Project Siantide is too important—>> Minst cut himself off and let his shoulders drop he shook his head and gave Jhonnen a pleading look. << No, I can’t do this! I—I’m not General Minst! I’m just a grunt. I’m not going to die for this. >>

Jhonnen believed him. He couldn’t sense any misdirection and while his ability to discern the truth wasn’t absolute, it was generally good enough that he relied on it. “That’s good thinking, assuming you’re not actually the general.”

<< I’m not, you’ve gotta believe me. Minst deleted all the files about the project and then set the reactor to self-destruct! He muted the self-destruct sequence countdown, asked me to stall you. Here—listen. >>

Not-Minst pushed a button and a voice from the overhead speaker announced that the power
reactor was going to self-destruct in five minutes.

<< I’ll tell you where Minst is, you’ll let me flee this death trap. Yeah? >>

Jhonnen sighed accepting that this might make him look like an idiot. “Yeah.”

Not-Minst looked relieved. << General Minst and his advisor are inside the reactor’s fallout vault. It’s the only place here that will withstand the self-destruct blast. >> He handed Jhonnen a data-spike. << Here’s the code sequencer you need to open the vault. It will take about a minute to input them all. >>

The overhead voice announced that they had four and a half minutes.

<< The vault is back out of here and all the way at the end of the corridor. Please, time’s short, let me leave. >>

“I’d run if I were you,” Jhonnen said, hoping again that this grunt wasn’t actually General Minst. Baras would actually kill him if he let Minst escape.

The imposter took off and Jhonnen and Vette darted down the long hall-way to the door to the fallout shelter and began putting in the code sequencer, Vette manning the machine.

The overhead voice announced that they had sixty seconds. Vette gave a strained laugh. “Sure hope that imposter was right and that thing takes less than a minute.”

“You and me both,” Jhonnen agreed, feeling his heart rate spike. He watched Vette work like he was committing her profile to memory, the pattern of her lekku, the worried frown on her mouth.

Jhonny felt the intruders before he saw them and ignited his lightsaber. “I’ll keep you safe, keep sequencing.” He leapt and the trio of Republic commandos, and landed in the middle of them hard enough to rattle the ground. He beheaded the first one and kicked the second back. He severed an arm and swept with his leg until all three Republic soldiers were dead and then jogged back to Vette.

“The reactor core will self-destruct in ten seconds.”

Jhonnen looked at Vette and his heart filled his mouth. He’d gotten her killed. He’d gotten her killed. “And last words?” he joked, hoping that at least they went out smiling.

Vette shook her head, fingers working frantically. “I just wished we’d gotten more time together.”

He opened his mouth to question her and the reactor door whooshed open enough for them to dive inside. The door slammed closed behind them and the explosion rocked the facility. Jhonny caught Vette’s arm to keep her upright, relying on the Force to do the same for him.

<< That was reckless, Sith, >> snapped a rhodian. << You could have killed us all. I suppose this means my imposter turned tail. Stupid of me to entrust a grunt. I should have sacrificed my advisor here. >>

“Well aren’t you a joy to work for?”

<< True patriots are ready to die for their leader, >> said Minst. Jhonnen decided that while killing Minst wasn’t going to feel nice, it wasn’t going to feel bad either. << Now that this reactor core has been detonated, the Empire can’t duplicate Project Siantide. As Frellka no doubt demonstrated,
there is nothing more important than our project. I had no choice. >>

“Uh-huh.”

<< All your effort has been a waste. Siantide is out of your reach. >>

“Siantide was never the target,” Jhonnen said lazily.

Minst seemed surprised by that but held his ground. << Well I am at your mercy, but the others are safely beyond your grasp. General Durant and General Faraire are working to make Project Siantide a success. They are close to achieving working prototypes! No threat or torture will get me to compromise their locations. >>

“Kay,” Jhonnen said. He ignited his lightsaber and drove it through Minst’s breast plate before kicking the advisor in the head so hard it bounced off the shelter wall. He checked to make sure the man was still breathing and turned to Vette. “We’re stuck for a bit until the shelter unlocks.”

“Just us and the corpses. Cozy.”

“Corpse, singular,” Jhonnen hooked his lightsabers to his belt. “The other guy’s just going to have a fuck of a headache.”

Vette gave him a little smile and eye roll in response.

“So…” he cleared his throat awkwardly. “You wish we got more time together?”

Vette rolled her eyes again, a darker blue blush painting her cheeks. “Yeah. There you go, I said it.” She stuck her thumbs in the pockets of her pants. “You’re alright, for a sith. Reasonable and… kinda funny.”

“I used to be very funny,” Jhonnen sighed. “This life sucks the humor right out of you.”

Vette reached over and set a hand on his arm. “You must have been a riot back then.”

“A couple of people certainly thought so.” He smiled at her. “So, friends?”

She opened her arms and wrapped them around him, Jhonnen squeezed her back.

“Never thought I’d be hugging a sith lord,” Vette muttered against his temple.

“Technically I’m supposed to be untouchable, so, you know, don’t tell anybody.”

Her arms tightened around him and he buried his face in her neck, trying not to think about the last time someone had really hugged him. Back when he’d been barely more than a preteen. He remembered the smell of death sticks and flower perfume and pressed his nose to Vette’s skin to try and replace the memory with sweat and blaster oil.

They parted as the reactor door swung open and Jhonnen’s comm buzzed.

“Pierce here,” said Pierce as he materialized in Jhonnen’s palm. “Tracked General Durant’s battalion, led my black ops troopers on a recon run. Found Durant’s hideout.”

Jhonnen nodded for Pierce to continue.

“He’s got a full battalion guarding the compound. They’re establishing a perimeter of electronic defenses around the general.”
“That’ll be fun,” Jhonnen said with the tiniest eye roll. “Where are they?”

“Coordinates sent. My black ops troopers and I were able to slip past the perimeter before they got the systems online, but we were spotted. We’re taking fire, outnumbered. Should be able to hold them off long enough for you to break through but that’s it.”

“I’ll be there shortly.”

“Well we’re not going anywhere,” said Pierce with a shrug. “Knock out those defense systems. We’ll hold the position for you. Or worst case, our bodies will slow down their charge. Proud to have served, my lord. Pierce out.”

Jhonnen tucked the comm away and checked the coordinates against his map of Taris. It would be fastest to head back to one of the Imperial base camps and take the troop transport.

They battled through General Durant’s bunker, thinning out his remaining troops and destroying his electronic barriers until they found Lieutenant Pierce in a corner. He was holding his stomach like it would stop his organs from spilling out and, judging from the mashed qualities of some of the heads on the corpses at his feet and the blood on his gauntlets, he’d been out of ammo for at least ten minutes. Jhonnen admitted a certain sense of awe. The resistance coming in had been less than expected, which meant Pierce had taken out most of a batallion with a small handful of black ops troopers.

Impressive.

Most impressive.

“My lord,” Pierce said, against all odds riding up to his face. “I spent all my ammunition and I’m down to my last medpac, but Durant’s battalion is down.” He shook his head bitterly. “So is the rest of my unit. Never seen men stare death in the face and fight more bravely.”

“You did well. Can you survive long enough to get to an infirmary?” Jhonnen asked.

“I believe so, my lord. General Durant and his guards have retreated inside the compound. Proud I ushered you to the doorstep.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen said. “You definitely did that. Get patched up, Lieutenant. We can handle this from here.”

With that, Jhonnen and Vette pressed deeper into the compound, carving their way through Durant’s defenses until they were face to face with the man himself.

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said.

“I’m not hiding anymore, Sith,” said General Durant, an older human male. “We delayed you long enough to achieve success. We’ve stabilized the Siantide cells. Now the Republic has a new power source that gives us the advantage in this war.”

“First off, I don’t care, second off, given as Frellka yelled at me about the Treaty of Coruscant I was under the impression that we weren’t at war.” For, like, five more minutes until Jhonnen was done following Baras’s orders.

“Your actions here have violated the Treaty of Coruscant, Sith. We might as well be at war.”
“You started Project Siantide long before I showed up. Who’s acting in bad faith now?”

Durant snorted dismissively. “General Frellka and General Minst’s sacrifices won’t be in vain. This blaster is the—”

Jhonnen Force shoved Durant into one of his mooks mid-tangent. He drew his lightsabers and ignited them.

Durant took a shot and Jhonnen tried to deflect it but it was deflecting a much heavier round. He managed to knock it off target enough that it sunk into the meat of his thigh, dropping him to kneeling. Vette came up behind him, providing covering fire.

With a groan, Jhonnen forced himself back to his feet, favoring his injured leg. He focused on defending Vette while she fired at the Republic troopers.

She was a good shot, and when she wasn’t having to worry about cover because Jhonnen was providing it with his lightsabers she was a very good shot.

Durant and his guards hit the dirt and Vette turned her attention to Jhonnen. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen groaned, pulling out a medpac and using it. “He missed anything vital, it just throbs.” He looked at the bodies. “Nice shots by the way.”

“Thanks,” Vette smiled back at him.

Jhonnen produced his holocom as it vibrated and raised a confused brow at Lieutenant Pierce.

“I’m in a medevac transport,” explained Pierce. “Arriving back at bar. Needed to tap you. Darth Baras has made contact, I updated him. I have him and Moff Hurdenn on holo for you.”

_Hooray_, Jhonnen thought sarcastically. “Put them through, Lieutenant.”

“Apprentice,” said Baras as he flickered into view. “Your progress has been conveyed to me, and I’ve been briefed on the search for General Faraire. Moff Hurdenn informs me that Faraire has relocated all of the Republic’s forces on Taris to protect his command center at the Republic stronghold.”

“Well,” said Jhonnen, looking for a bright side. “At least we know where he is.”

“First you must convene with me. This assault will take all our firepower. I’ve summoned your crew to the base. They will all be utilized,” Baras told him. “And I’ve informed Moff Hurdenn that you are commandeering the entirety of his forces.”

“Yes, right,” a less than thrilled looking Hurdenn flickered into view. “They are yours to command.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen said.

“Nothing short of a full scale war will bring General Faraire down. Rendezvous with Hurdenn, Pierce and your crew at the Imperial base. There is much planning to do.” Baras re-dominated the comm. “Be swift.”

Jhonnen tucked his comm away and looked at Vette. “Well, this’ll be exciting.”

“You gonna be alright on that leg?”
Jhonnen nodded. “I can fight through the pain, it just makes me want things over with faster. The medpac’ll help.”

“And I suppose showing any sign of pain or weakness will get you killed?”

“Like bleeding near a firaxen shark,” Jhonnen confirmed. “Let’s get back to base.”

The next morning everyone convened for the final assault on General Faraire. Jhonnen spared Jaesa the smallest smile and had it returned. Quinn saluted and Jhonnen acknowledged it with a nod and then they all turned their attention onto Baras’s holo as he flickered to life in the center of the room.

“Time is of the essence,” Baras said. “Lieutenant Pierce, Captain Quinn, bring my apprentice up to speed on our enemy’s activity.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Quinn, turning his attention to Jhonnen. “It’s a fairly complex situations—”

“General Faraire, the War Trust’s most senior member, is garrisoned in a fortified wing of the Republic’s main base,” interrupted Pierce. “He’s got a huge armor protecting him, more reinforcements on the way. We’re outnumbered eight to one.”

Quinn bristled politely (meaning he bristled but got it under control in short order). “My lord, the lieutenant’s statistics are inexact, but the general thrust is sound. The numbers favor Faraire, but there are ways around that.”

“What do you have for me?” Jhonnen asked.

Quinn nodded. “Now, to maximize our chances, we must coordinate three simultaneous strikes. One will destroy the base’s power station, another will sabotage it’s spaceport force field to thwart any reinforcements, and the last will force the conscripted regiments of Faraire’s army to flee.”

“Sounds fairly straightforward,” Jhonnen said with a nod. It was a lot, but Quinn had broken it into bite-sized chunks.

*I can assess your enemies and kill them,* Quinn had said. And he seemed to be making good on it.

“Quinn will coordinate from the base and you will lead the front line offensive,” said Baras. “Beyond that, decide how to assign your men. Goodbye.”

Baras flickered out of sight and Pierce stood a little straighter, causing him to tower over everyone else. “I’m the best choice for front line work. You need a soldier.”

Quinn shook his head. “I disagree. If the frontal assault isn’t handled correctly, your route into the command center will be clogged with run-over battlefield soldiers. In my opinion, Jaesa should join you. She can use her power to see into the hearts of the enemy and identify the insecure ranks.”

“Jaesa it is,” Jhonnen replied. “We need the practice working in tandem anyway.”

“Very good, my lord,” said Quinn, looking a little bit pleased. “That leaves Pierce and Vette to handle the power station demolition and the spaceport sabotage. If the traps and mines that protect the power station aren’t circumvented in time, you’ll be under constant turret fire inside the Republic base.”
“If it’s traps it’s gotta be Vette. She’s brilliant at traps.”

“Shucks,” said Vette, rolling her eyes. “You’ll make me blush.”

“Which leaves Pierce to fuck up the spaceport,” Jhonnen said, looking to Quinn to confirm.

“Just so, my lord. Assaults have been assigned. Once you’ve cleared the way on the front, invade General Faraire’s command center at will.”

“Let’s get this war started!” Pierce said, a confident smile on his mouth. “My lord, any final words for the troops?”

“Every time I try and make a speech I sound like an asshole,” Jhonnen said. “They know, and we know, what’s expected of us and of them. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“Good luck, my lord,” said Quinn. “I’ll be coordinating the attacks via holo.”

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Pierce sneered. “The real soldiers have got this one.”

Both Quinn and Jhonnen bristled, but neither of them said anything. Pierce may have been one of the most effective soldiers he’d ever seen, but he was also clearly an asshole.

And Quinn was there first.

Jaesa and Jhonnen headed out into the Republic forces. Sneaking as close to Faraire’s base as they could without being seen.

“I am uncomfortable heralding in a war, Master,” Jaesa said in a low voice.

“I know,” Jhonnen agreed, worrying for Vette at the power station as much as he was worrying for himself and Jaesa with the frontline assault. “But there’s no choice.”

Jaesa nodded grimly and followed him as they took a patrol by surprise and inched closer and closer to the base until they were close enough to assault the front doors. Leaving a trail of cauterized bodies behind them, Jaesa and Jhonnen continued into the base to find General Faraire.

They found themselves outnumbered in a bottleneck, staring down a man wearing major’s stripes and a whole lot of blasters. “Sith,” said the major. “You are massively outnumbered. You will not invade General Faraire’s headquarter’s. Turn away at once.”

“Jaesa?” Jhonnen asked.

She nodded and bowed her head, radiating, to Jhonnen’s force sensitive eyes, a pure white light. “I sense much strength and conviction in most of these men...wait! There!” she pointed. “An entire column of soldiers who are forced to be here. Concentrate the attack on them and they will run.”

“Thank you.” Jhonnen leapt at the indicated column and cut down two men, the rest of the column fled.

“Conscripted scum!” shouted the major. “We still have numbers! All attack.”

The Republic did, in fact have numbers, but Jhonnen’s forces had two Force users and still a fair number of guns and before long, Jaesa and Jhonnen were proceeding deeper into Faraire’s compound, their men holding the line behind them.

“My lord,” Quinn said in his ear, sending a small thrill down Jhonnen’s spine. “I have updates
from the other fronts. I’m pleased to report that the Republic power station has been destroyed. Vette went through their traps like they were infant toys. From her report, I doubt anyone else could have achieved it. You were right in assigning her to strike the power station.”

“Vette used to ransack tombs. She’s brilliant with traps, I think I owe her a bonus,” Jhonnen said.

“When she puts her mind to it, she can be a very valuable asset,” said Quinn, which was probably the closest to a compliment he was able to force himself. “With the base security systems down, you’ll endure no automatic turret fire on our way to Faraire’s command center. And on the other front, Lieutenant Pierce was able to sabotage and lock the Republic spaceport force field controls.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jhonnen replied.

“Yes, it seems under that insubordinate exterior lies a very capable soldier. Now, when Faraire’s reinforcements land inside the base, they’ll be trapped behind the force field and unable to join the fight. Still, the general’s elite guard clogs the way to the command center. They are quite formidable.”

“Well,” Jhonnen sighed. “It wouldn’t be any fun if it were easy.”

Jaesa gave him a worried look and he smiled at her to try and assuage her worries. It clearly didn’t work.

“There’s no time to lose, my lord,” Quinn said. “Faraire’s command center awaits. Good luck.”

Jhonnen lowered his hand from his ear and summarized the conversation for Jaesa. “Vette and Pierce did their jobs but we’ve still got the elite guard on our end.”

“Understood, master,” Jaesa said, steeling herself for another onslaught.

They proceeded and found Faraire’s bodyguards without any sight of the man himself. Jhonnen drew their attention off of Jaesa to keep her from being overrun. Their sparring sessions had improved her lightsaber technique, but she hadn’t been a padawan for very long when Jhonnen had… kidnapped… her.

They cut down the bodyguards and General Faraire revealed himself. Yet another older human male.

“Let’s save on time, shall we?” Jhonnen said. “I threaten to kill you, you blather on about Project Siantide and how the Empire will never get their hands on it. I tell you I don’t care. We fight, you die, I go home and take a nap.”

Faraire glared. “You’re an idiot if you think—”

“Yes, I’m an idiot. Can we please move on!” he force shoved Faraire backwards and the General hit a button activating a floor lift and depositing a massive war droid in the room. Probably running the Siantide batteries.

“Jaesa!” Jhonnen shouted. “Dodge the lasers, you won’t be able to deflect them.” He leapt at the war droid and sunk both lightsabers into it. Using one lightsaber as a handhold, Jhonnen carved into the droid, trusting Jaesa to hold her own against Faraire long enough for him to handle the stupid, overpowered droid.

Once the thing was scrap he launched himself at Faraire and shoulder checked the man hard, knocking his blaster away from where it was pointing at Jaesa. Faraire staggered back and set his
jaw determinedly. “I wish I could sit around and discuss where I went wrong, but a good leader always has an exit strategy.” Faraire bolted for the hallway, disappeared and then reappeared walking backwards with Pierce’s gun to his forehead. Walking alongside Pierce was Quinn, looking about as close to smug as he ever came in public.

“Not so fast, General,” said Quinn. “I thought you might try to run.”

“Excellent work Qu—Captain,” Jhonnen praised.

Quinn looked slightly more smug.

“I surrender,” said Faraire. “I expect to be afforded the treatment promised to prisoners in the Treaty of Coruscant.”

“That makes you a Baras problem,” Jhonnen said. “Which suits me fine.”

“Yes, well,” said Moff Hurdenn, coming around the corner. “I will gladly take the general into custody.” He indicated that Jhonnen should walk with him away from the rest of the group and once they were more or less alone, said, “Congratulations on the success of your mission. Taking down the War Trust is an incredible victory. It is clear you are the future of the Empire, and I hope you will count me among your closest allies.”

“Uh, yes,” Jhonnen said awkwardly. “Of course Moff Hurdenn.”

He didn’t want to be the future of the Empire. He didn’t like the Empire.

“As a show of support, I place Lieutenant Pierce under your command. He will be invaluable in your domination of the galaxy.”

No. Nononononono he had a hard enough time with Quinn and Quinn at least tried to be personable with everyone but Vette.

“Works for me,” said Pierce, coming to join them. “Done what I can on Taris. Glad you’re willing to let me go, Hurdenn.” There was the edge of a threat in how Pierce said it.

“Uh… cool,” Jhonnen said, trying to think of a way out of it and finding nothing. “Glad to have you.” Shit and double shit.

“You won’t be disappointed,” promised Pierce.

Quinn cleared his throat, and took command of the situation, for which Jhonnen was grateful.

“Lieutenant, fall in. I will brief you on how things work here when we are back on the ship.”

“Can’t wait,” said Pierce dryly.

As they all started to head back towards the base, Jhonnen brought up the rear with Jaesa, he caught her by the elbow to secure a moment’s conversation away from the rest.

“Tread carefully around Lieutenant Pierce,” he warned her. “I don’t trust him.”

Vette hugged him when they were all back aboard. She waited until Pierce was getting situated and Quinn was back in the cockpit and the hug lasted for about two seconds total. Just a quick jerk and he was in her arms, clutched tightly before she turned on the ball of her foot and headed back to the engine room.
Jhonnen smiled like an idiot for a moment and then cleared his throat and cleared the emotion off his face. He headed to the holoterminal and contacted Darth Baras for the debriefing and the next step of this stupid plan to undermine the Treaty of Coruscant and fling both sides into open conflict again.

“Apprentice, the War Trust’s dismantling has been your finest hour, but a new challenge arises. One of our missing targets, Admiral Monk, has revealed himself.” Baras said. “As you may recall, my master, Darth Vengean, set off to conquer the fringe systems and inspire the Darth Council to reignite the war. Somehow, Admiral Monk caught wind of the plan and was waiting in ambush. He is laying siege to the flagship as we speak!”

“How did Monk find out, anyway?” Jhonnen asked.

“Information is a funny thing. It trickles in unexpected ways. Leave those concerns to me.”

Okay, so Baras has leaked the information to Monk somehow and he was now sending Jhonnen in to clean up the mess. Jhonnen didn’t have any proof, but since there was nothing he could do about it anyway he didn’t really feel like he needed any.

“Plan Zero calls for Admiral Monk’s head,” Baras continued unabated. “This maybe be our only opportunity to crush him. Our flagship is commanded by Moff Masken. Fly to the space battle immediately, board his ship, and stop Admiral Monk’s siege.”

“Yes, master,” Jhonnen said. The holo clicked off and he left to tell Quinn to lay in a course.
Jhonnen takes some time with Vette amidst the headache that is the hunt for Admiral Monk.

Jhonnen swung into the engine room after making sure Pierce was settled. He gave her a silent smile and Vette smiled back but only briefly, her lekku were apprehensive but… happy.

“What’s bothering you? You look… serious.”

“First time for everything.” She let her shoulders drop. “Okay,” she took and exhaled a breath. “I’ve been thinking about you. About me. About… all of that. You’re a super powerful Sith Lord on a revenge bender who can have anything he wants. I’m a former slave and a thief. And you spend all your time with me? Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Jhonnen said. “You’re a beautiful, hyper-competent badass who happens to be really funny. Who else would I spend my time with? Quinn? I mean I like the guy, but he’s not my friend.”

Vette snorted a laugh. “Anyway, let’s play Two Truths and a Lie. I tell you three things about me and you tell me which isn’t true.”

“Alright, but then it gets to be my turn.”

“Okay,” Vette grinned. “Here goes. I’ve been in jail sixteen times. I’ve got three sisters. I’ve worked as a hired assassin. Which one is a lie?”

Jhonnen smiled. “As surprised as I am to learn that you’ve been a hired assassin—stories I’ll want later—you’ve only got one sister. Two if you’re counting Risha.”

“Yes, Tivva. Good job! Guess that makes it your turn.”

Jhonnen considered for a moment. “I’ve been to a fancy Hutt party. I’ve never owned a pet. I made my first kill at fourteen.”

Vette studied him for a long moment. “The Hutt party has to be a lie. You left Nar Shaddaa when you were thirteen.”

Jhonnen smiled, she had been paying attention. “I didn’t say I was invited. I got a holocall to take my mother a clean dress when I was about eleven and she was performing for Drooga. I stole some snacks for Kira and I.”

“So which was the lie?”

“I made my first kill at fifteen.” He smiled at her. “I should get back to work.”

“This was fun,” Vette said.
Jhonnen nodded. “We should play it again sometime.” He left the engine room, feeling like something had changed between him and Vette and not being sure what that something was. He visited Jaesa next, passing by her room on the way to the galley to make caf. He offered her a comforting smile and Jaesa returned it with one of her own, a halting, fleeting smile that didn’t meet her eyes.

“Master,” she said, closing the door with a wave of her hand. “May I break character for a moment? Speak as a Jedi?”

Jhonnen nodded and stepped closer to her. “Speak softly and quickly.”

He wished he could just let her be her own person, but there was no chance of it now, not with Pierce and Quinn around.

“Of course,” she nodded. “There’s something I must confess.”

Jhonnen raised his brow.

“As a handmaiden on Alderaan, I was surrounded by falseness of the nobles and their political agendas. I could have used my power to expose it all and bring a corrupt system to its knees. But out of fear, I held back.”

“Why?” Jhonnen asked, suspecting that even if Jaesa had used her power on Alderaan nothing would have changed. The nobles liked things the way they were and one nosy handmaiden would have been all too easy to make disappear.

But maybe… maybe she should have tried anyway.

Maybe that was the noble thing to do.

“Maybe of revealing that I’m different. Or of not being strong enough to back it up and see it through.” She looked down and away. “Even now, I wonder if it’s your strength I’m relying on and not my own fortitude.”

“You’ve got your own strength, Jaesa. The fact that you’re enduring this at all is proof of that.” She should hate him for forcing her to live this lie and she didn’t seem to. That was strength. Strength he lacked.

“Still.” She looked back at him and frowned. “I know myself—there’s some of that Alderaanian handmaiden left in me. And I can get… discouraged.”

“I know, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing?”

Jaesa looked unconvinced.

“I… I’ll think of something, Jaesa. We’ll figure this out.”

He left her and returned to his room, the warmth from his conversation with Vette evaporating and leaving him cold. He settled on his bed and thought of Kira. Of the way on the worst nights, when his mother was working and the apartment walls pressed in like a vice around him, he could reach out and find Kira’s thoughts.

He tried to remember what it was like back then. Feeling Kira’s mind open to his, feeling safe and wanted.
He wanted to reach for Vette now, but after the last time, he couldn’t. She had been terrified, disgusted and confused. And she couldn’t reach for him back anyway. It would be more like the connection he’d shared with his mother than with Kira, reaching out in the night to touch her after a nightmare, knowing that the most he could do was wake her up.

Isixia had never been disgusted with him. She’d been exasperated often, but if he woke her up she’d get up and sit beside his bed of the couch. She was there for him.

Jhonnen rolled to his side and curled his arms around his pillow to try and get some sleep before they reached Moff Masken’s ship.

Moff Masken was about as pleased to see Jhonnen and Vette as Jhonnen had figured he would be. The Moff was not an idiot. The whole thing stank of a set-up because it probably was one and unfortunately that pitted Vette and Jhonnen against Masken and his men. Looking down at the bodies.

“Well,” he sighed. “Glad Quinn’s not here.”

“Yeah,” Vette agreed. “That would be awkward.”

They returned to the ship and she left him to tell Quinn about Masken’s death and Monk’s escape to the planet below.

Jhonnen exhaled and leaned against the door. “We need to go to Quesh, Captain.”

Quinn plugged in the directions. “I assume you intend contact Darth Baras about your victory over Admiral Monk, my lord?”

“As soon as I catch the guy,” Jhonnen exhaled. He couldn’t tell Quinn that Baras was responsible. Quinn wouldn’t believe him or wouldn’t care. His loyalty blinded him. “Monk jettisoned to the planet below.”

“And Moff Masken?”

“Believe it was all a setup and opened fired on me.”

“I will assume he’s dead then, my lord.”

“Yeah.”

There were a tense few minutes of Quinn navigating them to the orbital and Jhonnen feeling like he should apologize but also unwilling to apologize for killing someone who had open fired upon him. He wished, achingly, that Quinn could see Baras for what he was because eventually this was going to come to a head and he… he wanted Quinn on his side.

But it wasn’t going to happen.

“I’m taking Vette with me, down to the surface. Refuel while we’re gone, Captain.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Jhonnen tapped Vette on the shoulder and she got up off the sofa she’d virtually just flopped down on and followed him out of the ship and onto the orbital. They were stopped on their approach by a doctor and a droid who informed them that Quesh’s atmosphere was toxic and administer a shot to inoculate them against it.
“Lovely planet,” Jhonnen said, sitting beside Vette on the shuttle down. “Can’t believe we don’t visit more often.”

Vette chuckled a little bit. “Yeah, seems like a real vacation spot.”

They reached Quesh’s surface and picked up Monk’s trail, resolved to stay as out of the way of the Imperial-Republic conflict as they could, to make the trip as short as possible. Vette scooted up close on the back of the speeder, her arms wrapped tight around Jhonnen’s waist. He almost regretting pulling over and losing the contact as they reached the building where Monk and his handful of men had taken up a defensive position.

They fought their way through and Jhonnen’s assertion that Monk was working for Baras was confirmed when Monk himself appeared and snapped at him.

“What does Baras think he’s doing, sending you here after me?” Monk snapped. “Is he trying to make it look good, give himself an alibi? Because you can tell him ‘mission accomplished.’ Almost all my men are dead. You’ve done a great job making this look legit. Now back off!”

Jhonnen sighed. “It would have been nice if Baras had told me I was cleaning up another loose end. I feel I deserve that much.”

“So that’s it, is it?” Monk looked more disappointed than anything. “After a decade of service, we’re deemed expendable. Baras is a fool. Our covers are intact. Why is he doing this?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I think he enjoys it, personally. I cleaned out half his spy network on his orders last year.”

“He can’t think that we’re going to take this lying down.”

“Probably not,” Jhonnen shrugged.

“Men,” said Admiral Monk. “Our master has decided we’re expendable. Let’s pro—”

He was cut off by the sound of a blaster firing and one of his men slumped over dead. Vette cocked a challenging eyebrow from behind the blaster. Jhonnen Force threw Monk backwards so he hit the opposing wall and bounced off, slamming into the floor. Jhonnen beheaded the other guard and walked over to where Monk was picking himself up off the floor.

“I pity you,” Monk spat. “His blind obedient lap dog. No one’s safe… with Baras. Not even you.”

“Trust me, I’m counting the days til he tries to actually kill me. But that’s not something you need to worry about.”

“I hope he dies a painful death.”

Jhonnen beheaded Monk and exhaled. “Yeah, me too.” He looked back at Vette. “That was fun. Let’s go back to the ship and put it behind us, shall we?”

“We can try,” Vette said. She touched his shoulder, lightly at first and then gave it a squeeze. “Do you really think Baras’ll turn on you?”

“Probably when I’m not immediately useful anymore, like he did with Rylon. But, I’m his enforcer and he’s in the process of starting a damn war, so we’ve got time.”

“Think Quinn knows?”
“Quinn’s a smart man,” Jhonnen exhaled. “But his loyalty to Baras blinds him to a lot of shit. I don’t know about Quinn. I don’t know what he’s gonna do. He seems to like me well enough.”

“Uh-huh,” Vette said, unconvinced.

“Let’s… let’s just go.”

Baras called when they were back aboard The Tide. “Apprentice,” said Baras. “My master, Darth Vengean, is distraught. With his covert attack exposed, the Treaty of Coruscant has been broken.”

*Sneaky son of a bitch,* thought Jhonnen.

“And apparently, Moff Masken did not survive Admiral Monk’s ambush. What happened?” Baras asked, like he didn’t know the answer.

“The Moff was very convinced that it was an inside job and attacked me. I defended myself and he, like most people, did not survive the damn experience,” Jhonnen answered.

“Ah,” said Baras. “So he was twice the fool—first to falsely suspect us and then to believe he could defeat you.”

“Yep,” Jhonnen said, not wanting to bother with calling Baras out when there was no point to it. “That’s what happened.” He was more bored than anything. Bored and annoyed.

“Now, the final Plan Zero target has been discovered. The hunt for Jedi Knight Xerender takes you to Hoth. Contact me when you arrive.”

The terminal went dark and Jhonnen stretched his neck out, trying to work some of the tension from his shoulders. The Treaty was broken, just as Baras had intended. He was going to use the war somehow, but Jhonnen couldn’t figure out his end game.

Jhonnen wasn’t a strategist. He was a blunt object used to break down barriers. The sith equivalent of a sledgehammer. Quinn was the smartest person on board, but Quinn was so far up Baras’s ass Jhonnen knew he couldn’t be relied on.

It was frustrating.

He left the holoterminal for the quiet solitude of his room, where he could ruminate on being an idiot in peace.

There was a knock on the door almost immediately and Jhonnen opened it to welcome Jaesa into the room.

“Master,” she said. “I should have requested an audience with you some time ago. I have exciting news! In an effort to pull my own weight, I’ve been reaching out with my senses. I’m becoming aware of other Sith who operate in contradiction to the Empire.”

“Huh,” Jhonnen said, failing to grasp the significance. “That’s neat.”

Jaesa frowned at him and tried to explain further. “As I train and my sense of purpose become clearer, I find I’m able to scan entire planets or quadrants of space. As my senses reach out, I recognize certain signatures—several that are like looking into a mirror. I’m seeing the same insecurity that I feel as I feign loyalty to the Empire. If there are others like us, we should try and find them!”
It was a risky proposition, but she seemed so excited about it. Jhonnen sighed. “See if you can get a fix on their location but, Jaesa, our goal should be to remain under the radar until we find a way to get you home.”

“And if we never do? I might as well try to do some good while I’m here,” Jaesa retaliated.

Jhonnen didn’t have a good answer to that. He shrugged. “Follow your heart Jaesa, I’ll back you up if you need.”

She nodded and left the room. Jhonnen flopped onto his back on the bed and glared up at the ceiling. He lay like that for an hour before he realized that he hadn’t given Quinn a heading and left his room for the cockpit. He offered Quinn an exasperated smile. “Hoth,” he said. “How’s everything up here?”

Quinn plugged in the destination. “I need to speak with you, actually, my lord.” Quinn said. He stood up out of his chair and turned to face Jhonnen. “I’ve been tracking a series of broken Imperial signals on an encrypted channel. Tremendous interference. I’ve identified the source—Major Ovech, commander of Moff Broysc’s elite infiltrator unit—but that’s all.”

“You know him?” Jhonnen asked.

“I know him well, my lord. Served with him under Moff Broysc for many years. He’s an unmatched leader. Moff Broysc’s command ship does not respond when hailed. My gut says there’s trouble. Permission to investigate further?”

“By all means.” Jhonnen nodded. “Let me know what you find.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Jhonnen left and returned to his room. He lay there in the dark with his eyes open until he dozed off and only woke again when someone knock several hours later.

“I’m wearing pants,” he announced, sliding the door open with a wave of his hand as he rolled to sitting.

“That’s a relief,” Vette said. “Mind if I join you?”

Jhonnen shook his head. The door closed behind her and Vette flopped onto the bed. She sighed and stretched out.

“What’s on your mind?” Jhonnen asked.

“I keep thinking of Tivva, my sister,” Vette curled her arms around one of Jhonnen’s pillows and pulled it under her head so her chin was resting on it. “She wasn’t strong enough to work in the mines but she got more beautiful every year. Mother tried to hide it with mud and filthy clothes.”

“I can understand the fear. Did it work?”

“Not… not enough,” Vette sighed. “Mother was dedicated though. Broke Tivva’s nose once when a buyer was coming.” She swallowed and shook her head. “Anyway, I’ve got some credits put aside. I want to hire a tracker to find Tivva and Mother. I just need to use the Imperial data files on board. Get some leads for the tracker to start with. That okay?”

“Of course that’s okay,” Jhonnen said. “Anything you need to reunite your family within my power is yours.”
Vette snorted a little laugh. “That was intense and serious.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I understand what it’s like to lose people. I’d do pretty much anything to see mom or Kira again.”

Vette frowned. “You could hire a tracker to find Kira.”

Jhonnen shook his head. “She *hated* the Sith. Intensely, passionately. She… she wouldn’t want to know me now.”

Vette reached over and touch his leg. “She’s missing out. You’re pretty alright.”

“Pretty alright,” Jhonnen echoed, laying back on his back. “From you, I’ll take that.”
Frozen Heart

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen is forced to go to Hoth to deal with Jedi Master Xerender

Quinn actually knocked on Jhonnen’s door before they reached Hoth, waking the Sith lord from slumber. Jhonnen pulled on pants and rubbed his eyes before opening the door and greeting the Captain with a confused expression.

“My lord,” Quinn saluted. “Apologies for the hour. I was able to clear the channel and get to the bottom of Major Ovech’s relays.”

Jhonnen nodded, stifling a yawn.

“He’s in a state of Emergency,” Quinn lead the way to the holoterminal. “Patching him through now.”

At least, Jhonnen thought, he was pretty scowly when tired and scowly is what people expected of Sith lords. The holo flashed and a tall, broad human male appeared in the center.

“My lord,” said Major Ovech. “Your captain there is one in a million. I’d given up hope anyone out there would hear my distress calls.”

“Quinn is my best officer,” Jhonnen said, figuring Ovech didn’t need to know that he had two officers total. “He’s an invaluable part of my team.”

“Wish I still had him in my detail,” Ovech said bitterly. “Probably would have avoided this. Moff Broysc dispatched me and my officers to a secret weapons warehouse on Cato Neimoidia. Trouble is, it ain’t secret no more. We’re holed up. Surrounded by Republic forces. Trying to get Broysc to send the rest of my unit,” Ovech pinched the bridge of his nose. “But he’s gone radio silent.”

“It’s worse than that, my lord,” said Quinn. “The major’s ship has been commandeered by Broysc’s personal commandos and ordered to stay put.”

“Why the fuck would he do that?” Jhonnen asked.

Quinn gave a very small shrug.

“That tears it,” huffed the major. “Seen it a hundred times with Broysc. Better to cut bait and let good soldiers die than admit a mistake.”

“Honestly, from what little I know, this sounds pretty typical of Broysc.”

Both Quinn and Ovech nodded bitterly.

Ovech looked over his shoulder at something Jhonnen couldn’t see. “Enemy was pausing between breaths. Gearing up to charge again. Looks like the end of the line for me. But I’m not going out without a fight. Ovech out!”
The channel went dark and Quinn turned to Jhonnen, his blue eyes intense. “My lord. Major Ovech would be a terrible loss. I served on his ship, know it like the back of my hand. I can infiltrate and try to restore command to his men. They would then be free to join the fight.”

Jhonnen nodded. He opened his mouth and a yawn broke through. “Sorry,” he apologized immediately. “Absolutely, Captain. Meet us at the Hoth orbital when you’ve finished and best of luck.”

“Thank you, My lord.”

Quinn left and Jhonnen padded on bare feet to the kitchen for some caf. Quinn had made a pot and Jhonnen let his sliver of affection for the man widen and grow.

He liked Quinn.

Which made it a pity that he couldn’t trust Quinn about the whole Baras thing.

Jhonnen headed into the cockpit and settled in the co-pilot’s seat, watching the stars as the autopilot whooshed them towards Hoth. He didn’t particularly want to go to Hoth, but there wasn’t much choice in the matter. He’d finished his cup when he heard sounds throughout the ship, Pierce coming awake. A little after that he heard Jaesa head to the galley for something to drink.

Jhonnen sat there in the co-pilot’s seat. No one would come check on him because no one would come check on Quinn and it would be assumed that Jhonnen was still asleep.

Which gave him some privacy of a sort as he listened to the sounds from the rest of the ship.

Jhonnen flipped on the holoterminial as they reached the Hoth orbital. Baras flickered into view. “Now that Admiral Monk and the War Trust have fallen to your might, all that remains is Jedi Knight Xerender,” Baras said. “Xerender has dedicated himself to the Republic like no other, he’s led our enemies to many cunning victories. Not only is he a symbol of inspiration for the Republic, he’s been a thorn in my side for a long time.”

“So what’s someone that inspirational doing in an inhospitable wasteland like Hoth?” Jhonnen asked. Hoth was where dreams went to freeze to death.

“The Chiss traitor you spared,” Baras let the word hang in the air like a reprimand for a moment. “Confirmed Xerender’s presence and has since informed me that the Jedi is seeking a superweapon. I can uncover no information about this weapon, only that it was lost in the wreckage of one of the crashed star ships from the war.”

“So is this a two part mission or am I just stabbing a Jedi to death?”

He could feel Jaesa’s displeasure at his phrasing.

“His death is the goal, but if the weapon can be salvaged, all the better.”

Jhonnen resolved not to acquire it.

“Your contact on the surface,” continued Baras. “Is Commander Lanklyn. He’s been tracking Xerender and should be ready to meet you at the Imperial Base. The commander occasionally bites off more than he can chew. But he’s been warned that this mission cannot afford anything less than perfection. Xerender is the last of your targets. Report to me when you know the nature of the superweapon he seeks. Get this right, apprentice.”
The comm clicked off and Jhonnen stretched his neck. “So, who’s drawing the short straw and accompanying me to the surface?”

“Um, yeah,” Vette cleared her throat and faked a cough. “You should,” she faked more coughing, “leave me on the ship. I’m,” another cough, “I think I’m fighting off a cold.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes.

“Forget that coward, my lord,” Pierce said. A little snow won’t stop me. I’m ready for action.”

Jaesa nodded. “I too would gladly accompany you on this mission, my lord. I wish to see all the galaxy has to offer.”

“That settles it then,” Jhonnen said. “Vette, you get to stay here and wait for Quinn. Pierce, I want you to make yourself available to our Imperial allies, they could probably use your cunning. Apprentice, you’re with me.”

There were nods all around and, after changing into cold weather gear, Jaesa and Pierce followed Jhonnen out of the airlock and onto the orbital proper. Pierce went to make himself useful and would likely take the next shuttle down. Jaesa sat next to Jhonnen for the trip to the surface, her knees together and her hands folded in her lap.

They’d have to work on her body language. She didn’t hold herself like a Sith apprentice.

“Sprawl a little,” Jhonnen told her in a low voice. “Make yourself look bigger.”

Jaesa exhaled and shifted to take his advice. “It doesn’t feel natural, Master.”

“It gets easier with practice, I promise.” He gave her a smile that dimmed as the shuttle landed. “Come on, apprentice, let’s go see what Lanklyn can tell us.”

Jhonnen wrapped the Force around him like insulation but was still grateful for his heavy jacket as Hoth’s bitter cold tried to bite through him. He looked over to make sure Jaesa was alright, but she was fine, bundled up with her steaming breath puffing out at regular intervals. They moved through the base to where they were supposed to meet Commander Lanklyn, something about the name striking Jhonnen as familiar but he couldn’t quite place it.

The man who met them was not Commander Lanklyn, but was instead a Ensign named Slinte who explained that they were ahead of schedule and Commander Lanklyn was out tracking Xerender but hadn’t reported in. Also he apparently hadn’t moved.

So, either he was dead or he was captured, and Jhonnen still clinging desperately to the last vestiges of optimism allowed a Sith, chose to assume he was captured.

With Lanklyn’s supposed location and the assurance that communications on Hoth were sketchy and hard to make secure, so he was more or less on his own the moment he left, Jhonnen led Jaesa away from the base.

He requisitioned a speeder and, with Jaesa holding tightly to him, took off on what he hoped was a rescue mission.

They fought through the pirate stronghold until they found Lanklyn, who Jhonnen now recognized as being the officer who had transported the SIS agent to Baras shortly after Jhonnen had become the Darth’s apprentice.
Lanklyn, shaking in the cold, made no such associations. “My lord,” he said, kneeling more because he was injured than out of respect. “Is that you? I heard the sounds of battle outside and grew hopeful.”

“It’s me,” Jhonnen nodded. “We’ve come to break you out.”

“Sorry for this trouble. But the truth is, my capture gives us great insight into the enemy. Jedi Xerender is a craft adversary. I thought I was tracking him and his men when I found myself led into a pirate ambush. It seems he had the Republic’s elite Talz commandos lure me off his trail. The Talz are unmatched trackers, highly cunning.”

“Well that will be fun,” Jhonnen sighed. “What else did you learn?”

“Very little, my lord. Apologies. Still, if Xerender’s been giving command of the Talz, this weapon he’s after must be supremely important. I know where the Talz headquarters is located. Maybe you can force one of them to confess what Xerender is after.”

“It’s the closest thing we have a lead at any rate. Get yourself to the nearest Imperial outpost, Commander.”

Lanklyn saluted and then took off. Jhonnen and Jaesa left the White Maw base and headed for where Lanklyn had marked the Talz base on Jhonnen's map. They crept into the cave and stopped near the entrance. The cave was littered with Talz bodies. Jhonnen and Jaesa picked their way along.

In the center of the cave they found a Jedi padawan, human, skinny and understandably paranoid given that he was the only living thing besides Jaesa and Jhonnen in the cave.

“What? A Sith?” The padawan looked him up and down. “First Xerender abandons me, now this!”

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Jhonnen said, expecting the words to have zero effect.

“Why should I trust you? You’re my sworn enemy.”

Jhonnen had to admit, that was a valid point.

“At least a Sith I can see and fight straight up. I won’t be assassinated in the dark like these poor Talz.” The padawan took a few panicked breaths. “My Master would tell me not to attack—but he’s not here. Defend yourself, Sith!”

Jhonnen juked out of the way and kicked out as the padawan lunged at him. He parried the next blow and dropped his weight to come up under the kid’s guard and toss him backwards into one of the portable houses the Talz had set up.

“I’m not here to hurt you.” Jhonnen said again.

“Bah,” snorted the padawan. “Go ahead and kill me. I didn’t want to die at the hands of the beast anyway.”

“Still not planning on killing you,” Jhonnen said. Admittedly thinking that plans could change if the kid didn’t settle down. He wasn’t going to risk his life or Jaesa’s for some padawan. “What beast?”

“The Talz warned my master about Broonmark. He’s a savage Talz seeing revenge on Fetzellen and the others for ousting him. But did Xerender care? No! Now Broonmark’s in here somewhere,
murdering—wait! Did you hear that?” He looked around with wide eyes and Jhonnen listened for whatever was upsetting the padawan.

The poor man backed away from Jhonnen, lightsaber ignited, looking around.

Claws erupted from his chest as a talz uncloaked behind him. The body slid to the floor.

<< All dead at our hands! Sith must leave now or join the dead >> buzzed Broonmark (probably).

“Oh fuck off,” Jhonnen said, igniting his lightsabers.

<< Our clan is betrayed. Fetzellen now leads. Fetzellen and all who follow him must end. We know Sith craves Jedi Xerender. Xerender is with Fetzellen. But Sith must not get in our way. >>

“I’m literally just after the Jedi.”

<< Fetzellen and others hunt with Xerender. They hunt for Xerender. Our clan must be clean. We must have our vendetta. Do not block our hunt. >>

“I’m all for staying out of each other’s way as much as is reasonable,” Jhonnen said, eyeing Broonmark carefully.

<< Sith are smart. We speak what we know. The weapon Xerender craves is not a thing, it is another Jedi. His lost clan leader, Master Wyellett. >> Broonmark shook his head and reactivated his stealth field generator. << We waste too much time. Fetzellen and all talz must die. >>

Jhonnen waited a few moments before turning to Jaesa. “We will make camp here tonight and head for the outpost to meet up with Lanklyn in the morning.”

“Amidst all the corpses?”

Jhonnen used his lightsaber to open one of the small housing units. “No, we’ll sleep in here. But it’ll be dark before we can reach the outpost and I don’t relish freezing to death.”

Jaesa nodded her agreement and followed Jhonnen into the small housing unit. They scrounged for something to eat and then hunkered in for the night.

“What your relationship with Vette, Master?” Jaesa asked, sitting down beside him on the bedding.

Jhonnen wished that any of the dozen of times he’d told her to just call him Jhonnen when they were alone had sunk in. He shrugged his shoulders. “Not what you think,” he said. “It’s… it’s not complicated really. We’re friends. I look out for her and she looks out for me.”

“I thought, perhaps, it was romantic.”

Jhonnen laughed. “Why, you know something I don’t?”

Jaesa shook her head. “I could find out if you wanted but…”

“Don’t,” Jhonnen said. “It would be an invasion of her privacy first and foremost and in addition to that… I don’t know what I’d do if she did have feelings for me.”

“You don’t return them?”

He shrugged again and ran a hand through his red hair. “It’s not that simple. No matter what we do, no matter how brazen she is beside me, the Empire just sees her as my slave. That’s a power
imbalance even if she’d just my friend. Not to mention the fact that the Force is with me which is an actual power imbalance.”

“You don’t think anyone with the Force should fall in love with anyone without it?”

“I think it needs to be taken into consideration. I mean, look what it did to my parents.”

“What… did it do to your parents?”

“My father murdered my mother when I was thirteen.” Jhonnen shrugged. ”I gain strength through some of my really negative emotions. I’m not a jedi who turns away from them, I use my hate and my fear and my anger. I don’t even know if I’m in love with her.”

“You don’t know?” Jaesa wrinkled her nose.

“It could just be that she was the first creature to be kind to me in seven years. And I’ll repay that debt but I don’t know if it’s love.” He folded himself over his knees. “I’m attracted to Vette, but I’m also attracted to Quinn so you can see how good an indicator that is.”

Jaesa gave him a small smile. “So Vette won’t have any problem with us sharing the bedding for warmth?”

Jhonnen laughed. “That was your concern? Even if Vette and I were dating I’d be sure to include a provision for huddling for warmth on Hoth. It’s only responsible.”

In the morning they headed for the outpost to meet up with Lanklyn, leaving the cave of corpses behind them. They reached the outpost around midday and made their way to where they were supposed to contact Darth Baras. They arrived in the midst of a drama unfolding with Xerender having sliced into the comms and Baras ordering Lanklyn to get Xerender off the holo, which Lanklyn couldn’t do.

“As you can see, Baras,” said Xerender. “I control this planet. I’ve tapped your communications and can anticipate your every move. As Commander Lanklyn knows firsthand, the talz keep me one step ahead of even you.”

“Someone’s killing off the talz,” Jhonnen said flatly.

“Ahh,” Xerender looked down his nose at Jhonnen. “The lap dog returns. If your trainer knows what’s good for him, he’ll muzzle you.”

It was funny because Baras hadn’t done anything that looked like training since Jhonnen had left Korriban.

“I’m not here for a reunion, Baras,” Xerender returned his attention to Baras. “The last time we met, you were left drained and weaponless. This time, you won’t be so lucky.”

Bold words, considering that Baras wasn’t anywhere near Hoth.

Xerender signed off and Baras redirected his wrath, closing the Force around Lanklyn’s throat. The commander kicked and begged and then slumped over dead.

“Ensign Slinte,” Baras snapped. “You are now the coordinator of my dealings on Hoth. Don’t screw it up, Commander.”

Not for the first time, Jhonnen was forced to wonder how promotions worked within the Imperial
Military and how Quinn hadn’t made major yet. Nothing made any sense.

“Apprentice,” Baras looked at Jhonnen. “You’d better have good news for me.”

“I know what Xerender is after. The super weapon Xerender seeks is actually a Jedi Master named Wyellet.”


Jhonnen smiled at a private joke about cold weather conditions and dying of exposure, and then forced his expression back to neutral.

“Before his capture during the war, Wyellett was among the Jedi’s most powerful masters. The ship transporting him to me was destroyed in a fierce space battle in this system. I assumed he’d perished but…”

“He apparently didn’t die.”

“So it would seem. For beings that commune deeply enough, the Force can be as sustaining as rations. During the war, Xerender was Master Wyellett’s padawan. We battled. Wyellett took my lightsaber and used it from then on.” He seemed to get an idea. “If Wyellett is on Hoth, so is my blade. I will concentrate to locate it…” it struck Jhonnen as a profoundly bad idea to carry a weapon your nemesis could locate just by thinking about it hard enough. But maybe this was why he wasn’t a Jedi master. “Yes! There,” Baras came out of his trance. “Coordinates sent, Commander. Now go, apprentice. Find the lightsaber and the Jedi.”

The comm flicked off and Commander Slinte turned to Jhonnen with wide, worried eyes. “My lord, the area indicated is in an uncharted quadrant where black marketeers are said to operate.”

“Thanks for the update.”

“What should I do while you’re gone, sir?”

“Take a breather,” Jhonnen said. “See to it that Commander Lanklyn’s family is notified.”

Jhonnen and Jaesa snagged a quick bite to eat before heading out to find Master Wyellett and Baras’s lightsaber.

His comm buzzed and Jhonnen answered it, smiling more brightly to see Vette on the other end.

“How’s it going?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen smiled at her an shrugged one nonchalant shoulder. “Freezing my ass and other sundry parts off. Hunting down a Jedi. How’s things on the ship?”

“Good, good, Captain No Fun just got back. His mission or whatever seems to have gone well. He almost smiled at something earlier.”

“I look forward to the details. Did you need something?”

“Just wondering how you and Jaesa are getting along,” Vette said. “Being trapped here with Captain No Fun is better than being on Hoth, but only just.”

“Aw, I miss you too.”

She smiled and laughed a little. “Yeah, okay. I’ll let you get back to it.”
He tucked his comm away and left the outpost with renewed vigor, determined to wrap this up as quickly as possible.

There was something about being in a black market that made him homesick. He’d never been to one before, but the Bleeders on Nar Shaddaa had operated out of his old neighborhood. The black market had been a fact of life even if he personally had never really gotten involved. There was no sign of Xerender, but Jhonnen found a small collection of Talz at a back booth haggling over a lightsaber.

“I’ll be taking that and the location of your Jedi boss,” Jhonnen said as he strolled over. “Whatever they’re paying, I’ll double it.”

“Double,” said the seller, credits in his eyes.

The talz buzzed a warning about how Sith didn’t negotiate and then offered to triple the price if the seller and his gang would fight alongside them.

The seller agreed and Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers. “Think twice.”

“Get ‘im!”

Jhonnen kicked the seller in the chest, sending him ass over teakettle.

“Jaesa, handle them, I’ll handle the talz.”

He lunged at the nearest talz and force slammed him backwards. Before he could recover Jhonnen kicked him sharply in the ribs and turned his attention to one of the two others. “Run,” he advised.

<< We do not run, Sith-clan. >>

Jhonnen swung and severed the talz’s head. “Wrong answer. Anyone else wanna take me up on the offer of mercy?”

The third talz turned to run and made a terrible gurgling noise before it slumped to the ground, a handful of hair and esophagus floating in mid-air.

Broonmark pushed the button on his steal field generator and began buzzing angrily at Jhonnen.

<< These talz are of our clan. These talz follow Fetzellen. Sith blocks our hunt! Steals our kills! Sith fail to heed our warning! Undermine our cleansing. Does Sith block us deliberately? >>

“I wasn’t trying to kill anyone,” Jhonnen said flatly.

Jaesa came up to his side. “I have the lightsaber.”

“Nicely done.”

<< Our clans must not cross. Sith must stop for good! >> Broonmark threw himself at Jhonnen, who Force shoved himself and Jaesa apart so the talz hit only empty air. Jhonnen ignited his lightsaber and used it to block the blow from Broonmark’s vibrosword. He slammed the Force into Broonmark to knock him back into the cavern wall.

Broonmark buzzed angrily and launched himself forward. Swinging hard with his vibrosword he knocked one of Jhonnen’s lightsabers out of his hand and caught the sith lord around the middle, sending them toppling end over end. Broonmark ended up on top and menaced Jhonnen with sharp...
and bloody talons.

Jhonnen socked him in the face.

“Master!” Jaesa’s cry ricocheted off the icy cavern walls and then the end of her saberstaff erupted through the talz’s chest.

Broonmark slumped and Jhonnen forced the body off of him. “Thanks,” he exhaled, feeling his bruises. “Did you leave anyone alive?”

Jaesa nodded. “They’re cowering by the stall.”

Jhonnen smiled at her and walked back over. “Now then, double what they were going to pay you and tell me where you dug it up.”

The black marketeer stared at Jhonnen. “The… the starship graveyard. Big ol’ wreck. Here are the coordinates. Please don’t kill me.”

Jhonnen paid and tucked the lightsaber away. “Pleasure doing business with you.” He gave a short nod and then lead Jaesa back into the cold so they could start looking for the wreck.

At least the starship graveyard wasn’t far in the cosmic scheme of things. The Imperials had an outpost in the general vicinity.

Fetzellen provided less of a challenge then Broonmark if only because he lacked Broonmark’s savagery. Namely, when he knocked Jhonnen down, he didn’t immediately menace his eyes and Jhonnen bucked him off in short order, thrusting his lightsaber through Fetzellen’s forehead. He exchanged a glance with Jaesa. “This may get unpleasant.”

“I am prepared, Master,” Jaesa said dutifully.

They fought their way through the remainder of the talz until they found an ice cave. Following through the tunnel they came across Xerender kneeling at the feet of an old man, a couple of soldiers standing near at hand.

“All these many years, entombed in this rubble, I have fed off the Force,” Wyellett said. “I have great insights to impart.”

“I love insights,” Jhonnen said. “Can’t wait to hear them.”

“What’s this?” Wyellett peered at Jhonnen. “I sense a presence. Baras…”

“Indeed,” Xerender stood and turned around, placing himself between his master and Jhonnnen. “This is Darth Baras’s apprentice, come to stop me from returning you to your command. Conserve your strength, Master. My men and I will dispatch this interloper.”

Jhonnen held his hands up. “Yours is the only death I’m after and that’s not even my idea. Why don’t your men and my apprentice sit this one out and we handle this ourselves.”

“So you realize how outnumbered you are.”

Jhonnen blinked at him. “Or, and here’s a crazy thought, I don’t think we need to get anyone not explicitly involved killed.”

“You must think I’m a fool if you expect me to hand over my advantage. Men, kill the Sith!”
Defend Master Wyellett at all costs!”

“Jaesa, handle the soldiers.”

“Yes, Master.” Jaesa threw a wall of Force forward and swept both of the soldiers off their feet. Jhonnen engaged Master Xerender. Xerender was skilled in the force and more than a little bit larger than Jhonnen. So Jhonnen fought dirty. He ducked a swing by rolling with his shoulder and threw a handful of snow in Xerender’s face, taking him by surprise enough for Jhonnen to stick one leg between both of Xerender’s and sent them to the floor. Xerender’s head hit ice and bounced.

Jhonnen hit him in the face a few times so the concussion had company.

“Stop!” a wave of Force knocked him off of Xerender and a few feet away. Jhonnen came to his feet, joined by Jaesa now that the soldiers had been dealt with. “Sith,” said Master Wyellett. “Had my strength returned before this moment, I would have kept Xerender from engaging you. Now, he is down, and your fight has made this chamber unstable. It is nearing an inevitable collapse. You’ve proven your superiority. Let me bargain for Xerender’s life.”

Jhonnen clicked off his lightsabers. “My orders are to kill him,” he said flatly. “And he didn’t exactly win any points with me.”

“Death is not the only solution. Baras seeks our removal, and I have no desire to return to fight for the Republic.” Wyellett looked fondly down at Xerender. “Xerender is young and driven, yet he has only begun to grasp the ways of the Force. In truth, I was the same until being buried on Hoth. Here, I communed with the Force to the exclusion of all else.”

“And that made you not want to fight for the Republic?” Jhonnen said skeptically.

“The Force is with me, greater than ever now. I suspect I could defeat you quite handily. But I am no longer concerned with the tidings of this galaxy, or these times, I seek only to continue my transcendence.”

“And yet you summoned your padawan to you. I find this all very hard to believe.”

“I wanted to share my revelations and bring him to the same understanding. This excavation site is nearing collapse. Should we battle, we would both be crushed. Allow Xerender and me to be buried here for eternity. Your objective will be met, and our lives will be richer, finding oneness in the Force.”

Jhonnen stared at the old master for a moment. “Shouldn’t… Shouldn’t Xerender get a say in this?”

“I will convince him it is for the best. Sadly, I don’t think he’ll come around any time soon.”

“So, and let me get this straight, you want me to let you rob a man of his life’s purpose and trap him in a hole with only the Force to sustain him. Forever.”

“It’s not that simple, but yes.”

“No.” Jhonnen said flatly. “Better he be killed then robbed of his agency in such a profound and fucked up manner. How did you—how did you think I’d agree to that?”

“Master, shouldn’t we—”

“You can bury yourself for all eternity,” Jhonnen continued despite Jaesa’s attempt to interject. “You can make that decision. But I’m killing Xerender and if you try and stop me, I will kill you
Jaesa touched his arm. “It’s the peaceful solution, he’ll be at peace.”

“No, he’ll accept it the way everyone accepts the inevitable, by either letting it happen or going nuts.” Jhonnen ignited his lightsaber. “So, Master Wyellett, are you going to go peacefully back to your meditations or is this chamber going to collapse on us?”

“I will not let you hurt him.”

Jhonnen got into his stance. “Let nothing old man. You have to be stopped.”

Three large chunks of ice shot out of the wall at Wyellett’s command and flew towards Jhonnen, he ducked low, letting them sail over his head, rustling his hair. Jhonnen launched himself forward. He had to control this fight from close range, when it came to raw Force power Wyellett had him well outmatched.

But the old man had been mediating in a hole for ten years, his reflexes were rusty, limbs slow with disuse.

And Jhonnen practiced every damn day because combat distracted him from everything else that was wrong.

Wyellet’s lightsaber grazed Jhonnen’s outer thigh but Jhonnen blocked low and forced the weapon away from him. He clicked off his other lightsaber and socked Wyellett in the jaw. The Jedi Master reeled. It had been ten years since he’d felt pain. Jhonnen swept out with one leg, refusing to let up for even a moment. Wyellett hit the floor and Jhonnen drove his lightsaber through his back.

With Wyellet dispatched, Jhonnen turned his attention to Xerender. Frowning, Jhonnen gently put the tip of his lightsaber through Xerender’s heart, killing him instantly. It didn’t feel right, killing a man who couldn’t fight back. But exposure probably wouldn’t kill the jedi unless he stayed unconscious for a long damn time, and he wouldn’t.

Jhonnen hooked his lightsabers back to his belt. “You alright, Jaesa?”

Jaesa’s jaw stiffened like she was biting the inside of her cheek.

“You don’t have to be, I’m not,” he reassured her. “Were you and Nomen Karr… uh… that close?”

Jaesa shook her head. “He hadn’t been my master for very long. But… I can relate to how Xerender must have felt. When I felt Nomen Karr’s distress, it called out to me.”

Jhonnen tried for a smile and some levity. “Well, at least we both know I’ll never try and trap you in a hole for all time to commune with the Force.”

Jaesa tried and failed to smile.

“Too soon?”

“A little bit, Master.”

“Let’s just… go home.”

It was a relief to be back on the ship. No one met them at the airlock and that was okay. Jaesa headed to the fresher and Jhonnen dropped his jacket in his room before accessing the holoterminal.
to tell Baras that he’d successfully dealt with both Xerender and Wyellett.

“Apprentice,” Baras said. “You are looking at a very pleased man. Admiral Monk destroyed; the War Trust no more… Now, with Jedi Xerender and Master Wyellett neutralized, all of the Republic’s most vaunted leaders are no more. Plan Zero is complete.”

Jhonnen nodded. “So what’s next?”

“There is more to discuss—much of it of a sensitive nature, which I do not wish to convey via holo. Return to my chambers here on Dromund Kaas. Immediately.”

Jhonnen nodded and stretched as the holo went dark.

As much as he wanted to use the steam from the fresher to work life back into his cold limbs, Jaesa was still using it and so he headed to the cockpit to check in on Quinn and see how his rescue of Major Ovech had gone.

It was impossible to tell anything from Quinn’s face. He stood up from his seat and saluted when Jhonnen entered the room. “I trust everything went well on the planet, my lord.”

“Yeah, fine,” Jhonnen said with a small shrug, not wanting to think about how Xerender had actually died. “How was your mission?”

“Pleased to report, Major Ovech and most of his officers have been saved.”

“How’d you do it?” Jhonnen asked, leaning back against the wall. “Must have been difficult.”

Quinn’s lip twitched like he wanted to smile but felt it would be unprofessional. “I was able to infiltrate Ovech’s starship and seize control of the operating systems. I identified where his men were being held, freed them, and locked Moff Broysc’s occupying force on the bridge. Ovech’s men promptly rescued him.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Well done, Quinn. That’s brilliant.”

“You’re too kind, my lord.” Quinn cleared his throat. “The Empire is stronger with Major Ovech. It would have been a shame if he was squandered.”

“Of course,” Jhonnen said, wondering if a day would come when Quinn would just take a damn compliment.

“Thank you for the opportunity. I’ll return to my duties.”

“I’ll go see if Jaesa’s done with the fresher.”

After he had a turn in the Fresher, Jhonnen checked in on Pierce—who had blackmailed Hurdenn to get off Taris and had an unhealthy obsession with how promotion worked for Sith and people who worked for them—and swung into the engine room.

Vette grinned at him and Jhonnen couldn’t help but grin back. “What, what is it? You look like your wildest dreams just came true.”

Vette laughed. “Not quite, but I did it! Maybe you didn’t think I could, but I did!”

“Did what?” Jhonnen asked. And then he remembered her plan and his eyes went wide. “You did?”
“Yes! A kubaz tracker name Krata found my sister Tivva. Found where she works, even the name of her boss.” Vette’s teeth scraped over her lower lip in an attempt to smile a little less broadly.

“Where is she?” Jhonnen asked.

“Nar Shaddaa! Can you believe that? Krata wouldn’t tell me any more until I pay him, but he found her!”

A small, desperate part of Jhonnen wanted to believe she’d found her way to Panwa Muni. That Vivex was looking after Vette’s big sister. But Nar Shaddaa was a big place and it was irresponsible to hope that it would be that small.

“We have to go to Dromund Kaas first, Baras’ll know if we detour, but as soon as I’m done with that we’ll go find your sister. I promise.”

Vette threw her arms around him and Jhonnen crushed her to his chest, blinking back the moisture as fast as he could.

“You. Are. The. Best.” She proclaimed right in his ear before letting go and stepping away from him. “Come on, let’s hurry and get Baras’s chores over with.”

Jhonnen agreed and headed for the cockpit to tell Quinn to put the heading in.
Jhonnen returns to Dromund Kaas at the summons of Darth Baras, and goes toe-to-toe with one of the most powerful Sith in the galaxy.

Dromund Kaas was wet when Quinn and Jhonnen left Jhonnen’s apartment and headed for the Sith sanctum to see what Baras wanted. Dromund Kaas was always wet. Everyone else was given a free afternoon that they were warned might be recalled immediately or span several days. It was anyone’s guess what Baras wanted or how long it would take.

Jhonnen, however, suspected that it was going to be something notably unpleasant. He set his mouth to a thin line, expression determined. Whatever it was it was just another step in the right direction. Another step up the ladder, he just had to get high enough that no one would step in when he fought (and killed) Lord Vitreous.

He would make any sacrifice.

…Almost.

The thought came as a surprise to him. He would give up almost anything. He would cross almost any line.

But he wouldn’t allow Vette to be hurt.

He wouldn’t betray Jaesa.

He would protect them against even his deepest desire. As surely as if they’d been his mother, or Kira. They deserved that much.

The thought troubled him all the way to Baras’s sanctum, where he pushed it back to see what his master required of him.

He turned his full attention onto Baras as the older Sith began to speak, “There is no time to waste, apprentice. Listen up. Plan Zero was always my desire. I’ve been whispering in my master Darth Vengean’s ear for years. Inciting full scale war was but one goal. The other was the downfall of Darth Vengean so that I may ascend to his seat.”

“Makes sense,” Jhonnen said, reflecting on how much he hated the way the Sith operated. He thought about Xerender and Wyellett, even Jaesa and Karr to a much lesser extent, how they were bound through duty and some sliver of affection long after the student-mentor bond was changed. He hated Baras and Baras only cared about how effective a tool Jhonnen was.

“The council doesn’t appreciate being undermined,” Baras continued. “They’re all but calling for Vengean’s head. A strike against him now would be met with universal support. How would you like to face off against one of the twelve most powerful Sith in the galaxy?”

Jhonnen got the distinct impression he wasn’t being given a choice. He exhaled through his nose and leashed his fear and irritation. “I can do it.”
“There’s another wrinkle. Darth Vengean’s apprentice, Lord Draahg, has been secretly working for me—which Vengean discovered before I could recall him. Vengean’s rage is growing. You must free Draahg and face Darth Vengean together.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Draahg knows Vengean’s weaknesses and how to breach his inner sanctum. Administer this resuscitation drug to Draahg. It will restore his strength. It will take both of you to overcome Vengean. So free the apprentice and destroy the master. Be off.”

As soon as they were out of Baras’s sanctum, Jhonnen turned to Quinn. “Wait here or back at the apartment, Quinn. I don’t want you along for this.”

“My lord?”

Jhonnen sighed. “As a non-Force sensitive, Vengean will single you out as the weak link. He’ll hurt or kill you to disrupt my focus.”

“Would that work, my lord?”

“I’m not eager to find out.” Jhonnen shrugged. “I’ll call when I’ve finished with him.”

“And if you… die, my lord?” Quinn shifted uncomfortably as he brought up the possibility.

“Get Vette and Jaesa to the spaceport.”

“Jaesa, my lord?”

“She’ll protect Vette until Vette has found a place to settle and then return to the Empire to take my place with Lord Baras,” Jhonnen lied. “Just, please do it, Quinn. I’m relying on you.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Leaving Quinn behind, Jhonnen headed deeper into the sanctum towards Vengean’s chambers. It was strange, not having someone watching his back. He was forced to realize that he had been with Vette for more than a year now. Fighting alone felt familiar and unpleasant, reminding him of the bad old days in his father’s house.

He killed the guards and found Draahg, a massive human male with red tattoos, strapped to a table barely breathing but aware. His eyes roamed wildly over Jhonnen while Jhonnen produced the resuscitation drug and administered it.

“I… I’m grateful,” Draahg said as he slid to the floor and then picked himself up. “To you and to Baras. I look forward to serving him directly once Darth Vengean has been destroyed.”

Draahg filled Jhonnen with warning bells, and while this wasn’t much different than his interactions with most Sith, it felt more immediately relevant.

“Where is Darth Vengean?” Jhonnen asked, eager to move on and be done with this.

“He’s in his inner sanctum, communing with the dark side, channeling his rage and power,” Draahg explained. “We have to confront Darth Vengean there, but it won’t be easy to access.”

“What’s the plan then? I’m assuming you have one.”

“Three outer rings of this compound must be breached before we can reach the inner sanctum, then
a key is needed to enter. It’s Darth Vegean’s personal key, but I made a copy and hid it. I’ll retrieve the key while you break through the outer rings.”

“And is there a reason we’re splitting up? Feels like it would make more sense to get the key and then tackle the defenses together.”

“To get the key, I have to be stealthy and use secret passages without being seen. Something tells me you’d be noticed.”

Jhonnen scowled at that. He was no more noticeable than any other sith, and less so than many on account of being half the size of someone like Draahg.

“You run the gauntlet of Darth Vengean’s security,” said Draahg. “I swear to you I’ll do whatever it takes to deliver the key.”

Jhonne got the distinct impression that it would be like arguing with a wall and they were running low on time. He scowled at Draahg but nodded. Draahg went one way and Jhonnen went the other.

Without someone watching his back, Jhonnen was forced to move more slowly, to be more aware of the possibility of being flanked. He moved through the rings, pausing in the shadows to catch his breath and once for a stim until he reached the door to the inner sanctum.

As if on cue, Draahg came up behind him. “You’re every bit as proficient as Baras said.”

Jhonnen frowned at the praise. Praise always came at a cost with the Sith. “Thanks.”

“I almost didn’t make it,” Draahg said. “There were traps in the passages. I got the key, but Darth Vengean probably knows we’re coming.”

“I didn’t figure we were going to sneak up on a Dark Council member anyway.” Jhonnen shrugged. “I will feed off your confidence.”

“That’s weird,” thought Jhonnen.

“If I should fall, I want you to know it was an honor to fight and die beside you.”

“Neat.” Jhonnen said flatly. Draahg was laying it on thick and Jhonnen couldn’t figure out why and that made him suspicious and cagey.

There was nothing he could do about it, and that just put him in a worse mood, so Jhonnen lead the way into Vengean’s inner sanctum, holding both lightsabers in his hands.

“Ah,” said Vegean, looking up as the door opened. “The apprentices of Darth Baras. Draahg, I will enjoy bleeding you anew.” His eyes fixed next on Jhonnen. “Jhonnen. Before you arrived, Baras was but a bit player. He would be nowhere without you.”

“It’s nice to be appreciated,” Jhonnen said dryly.

“Your talents are wasted on that man,” Vegean said. He shook his head. “It sickens me. Your master doesn’t deserve you. He’s a coward, pushing buttons from the darkness. You and I are people of action.”

“Which is probably why he sent me here, because button pushing doesn’t kill Dark Councilors without some help.”
“You’ve been outplayed, Vengean,” jeered Draahg. “Darth Baras has shown the galaxy that your wits are dull and your reach is short.”

“Enough,” the air around Vengean rippled. “I will not be insulted nor patronized. Beg me. Beg me for mercy, and I will kill you quickly.”

Jhonnen clicked on both of his lightsabers. “Has that ever worked? Not just for you, I mean for anyone.”

“You will regret mocking me. You will both die in excruciating pain.”

“You will beg for mercy.”

Vengean leapt at them and Draahg and Jhonnen scattered. Jhonnen darted to the left while Draahg pulled to the right. Vengean, perceiving Jhonnen as the more immediate threat leapt after him. The Force started to close around Jhonnen’s throat and he pushed it away. He dropped in under Vengean’s guard and slammed his elbow into the Darth’s solar plexus, wincing as he hit breast plate but buying time for him to slip between Vengean’s legs and out the other side.

Draahg came over the table with a vertical cut that Vengean parried and followed through with a devastating backhand. Draahg hit the floor but it bought the time Jhonnen needed to drive one lightsaber through the point of Vengean’s shoulder.

Draahg recovered and beheaded the Darth. He and Jhonnen clicked off their weapons and looked from the body to each other, a little bit amazed that they had both survived.

“For years, I’ve dreamed of vanquishing Darth Vengean. Glad to have had a hand in it,” Draahg said as they started to leave. “He fought hard and well.”

“He was a Dark Council member, did you expect anything less?” Jhonnen asked, cocking his brow.

“I have no delusions I would have survived this battle if it wasn’t for you. This is your victory,” Draahg said, a little too graciously.

“You beheaded him,” Jhonnen pointed out.

“And you, Baras and I will be unstoppable.”

“Riiight up until someone stops us,” Jhonnen said. “There’s always a bigger fish.”

“I predict we won’t meet that bigger fish for a very long time,” Draahg said confidently. “There are things I must clean up here for Baras, I’ll meet you back in his chambers.”

Jhonnen left Vengean’s chambers the way he’d entered them, stepping over the bodies of the Imperials, Sith and droids that he’d cut down on his way in. He hooked his lightsabers back on his belt and caught the lift back up to the sanctum’s main floor and then made his way down to Darth Baras’s chambers.

Quinn was standing in the main room.

Jhonnen gave him a surprised and confused little smile. “Did you wait here the whole time?”

“Yes, my lord. I felt it prudent; this way I would be informed promptly should you have perished.”

“Well, I didn’t perish but I’m sorry if you were bored.”
“Not at all, my lord.”

Jhonnen smiled at that, feeling a little bit better. “Well, it’s good to see you.”

Quinn followed Jhonnen into the back room where Baras was waiting for them.

“Look upon me, apprentice,” said Baras warmly. “You have never seen me so pleased. And look upon these chambers one last time. The humble trappings of yesterday. With our dismantling of Darth Vengean complete, I assume his seat on the Dark Council and return to Korriban.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen said, more concerned for what this meant for him. Probably more of the same but you could never know where the chips were going to fall in massive power plays.

“This could not be achieved without you,” Baras said. “We ascend together, apprentice. Only our combined strengths can propel us to the height of power.” He paused and looked towards the door.

Jhonnen turned his head and saw Draahg entering the room.


“It’s been a long time, master,” Draahg bowed, “I’m ready to join the front line.”

“Should be exciting,” Jhonnen said, his gut twisting while he wondered how this new change would affect him.

“Go and enjoy this victory, my apprentices,” instructed Baras. “But be ready for my call. I will not sit idle long.”

Jhonnen bowed low and then left with Quinn. “What’re you going to do with your leave, Captain?”

“I haven’t had a chance to consider, my lord.”

“Well plan it around Nar Shaddaa, I have a promise to keep.”

Jaesa was actually smiling when Jhonnen met her in the lounge late in the evening. He smiled back. “What is it?”

“I have good news,” Jaesa said, leading him to the medbay where there was less of a chance of being overheard. “I’ve located the Sith I sense who are secretly opposing the Empire! It’s unmistakable. They’re clearly turning away from the dark side. I hope you’ll allow me to reach out and befriend them.”

Jhonnen opened his mouth to reply when someone else cleared their throat.

Pierce emerged from the shadows like a hunting beast. “Ahem,” he said. “Often come here when I’m off duty. First time I ever heard anything interesting.”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose and adopted a dopey smile. “You often come by the medbay when you’re off duty? I hadn’t noticed anyone stealing stims.”

“Don’t pretend to understand Sith business,” said Pierce. “But you’re not allying with traitorous Sith, are you?”

“If by allying you mean aligning our lightsabers with their various parts, we are.” Jhonnen said. “Jaesa’s simply excited about my giving her her first mission alone.”
“Yes,” Jaesa cleared her throat. “That’s right. Sith who dare betray the dark side will be hunted down and destroyed. The lieutenant’s insinuation is an insult. He’d better take care not to repeat the offense.”

“Noted,” said Pierce with a small nod. “Won’t happen again.”

They waited a few minutes to be certain they were alone before Jaesa apologized in a low voice. “Sorry master, I was just so excited about my discoveries I forgot myself. I hope he bought it.”

“I’ll handle Pierce,” Jhonnen promised, worrying about the same thing. Pierce was no fool and he was probably the most devious person on the crew. He’d be a problem later on, but for the time being, there was nothing Jhonnen could do about him. He was too smart to come at Jhonnen head on, but he’d try and twist Jaesa to get what he wanted.

“I’ll be doubly careful from now on,” Jaesa promised. “With your permission, I’ll head out to find the light-leaning Sith I’m sensing.” She smiled again. “It will be so invigorating to unite others like us. We can begin to build a movement.”

Jhonnen worried about that. He didn’t need to be at the heart of a traitorous movement while working for a Dark Council member and trying to figure out how high was high enough to take on Vitreous. “Be careful,” he told her. “We might be on Nar Shaddaa for a while, comm when you’re headed back.”

“Yes, master.” Jaesa left, heading back to her room to pack.

Jhonnen returned to his room to wait for them to reach Nar Shaddaa. It felt like he’d just gotten his eyes closed when someone knocked on the door. He opened it with a wave of his hand and sat up to see Vette in the doorway.

Jhonnen yawned and rubbed his face. “We’re there?”

“I made you a cup of caf, let’s go!”

Vette was practically vibrating with delight as she and Jhonnen left the ship. She grinned like a type O star the moment they climbed into the taxi that would take them to Promenade and jogged ahead of Jhonnen to reach the Slippery Slopes Cantina.

“I can’t believe I’m about to know where she is,” Vette said excitedly. “I haven’t seen my sister in so long.”

Her enthusiasm caught like a match flame in Jhonnen’s chest and before long he was grinning too. He reached out with his thoughts, optimism building like hope in the pit of his chest. He couldn’t find Kira, but Vette caught his wrist to tug him the right direction and he thought he might miss Kira just a little bit less.

Vette didn’t let go of his wrist until they reached the kubaz tracker she’d hired. Krata had a pair of bodyguards, but didn’t look particularly defensive or anything.

<< Softly you come, yes? As agreed, >> said Krata. << You bring a Sith Lord. Expected, no concerns, no worries. >>

“I’ve got your credits,” Vette said, reaching into a pocket for her chit. << You said you have more information about Tivva?”

<< Yes. But credits first. In public. In case you do not like what you hear. >>
“Is something wrong?” Jhonnen asked immediately, head full of ways things could go wrong for a beautiful twi’lek on Nar Shaddaa.

Vette’s lekku twitched with concern. “Here are your credits,” she transferred the amount. “Now will you please tell me where my sister is?”

<< Tivva was sold to Toobu the Hutt. Powerful. Large. He has her work. A woman holds your sister’s leash. Crystal is her name. These are the coordinates. >>

Jhonnen tried to remember anything about a Toobu the Hutt and came up blank. His mother had gone to Drollo for protection and he’d been the only Hutt Jhonnen had needed to remember.

Vette grinned at him. “Let’s go find this Crystal woman.”

Jhonnen looked at the coordinates. “Looks like the barge is docked with the Promenade. We literally could have only been luckier if she was in this room.”

They headed off at a jog. Toobu’s pleasure barge was still docked with the Promenade when they reached it. It was more or less what Jhonnen had grown up expecting from pleasure barges. Beautiful men and women served as both staff and entertainment. Slave collars detracted from the view most of the time so the Hutts employed other means of control.

Jhonnen thought of his mother, returning from a party on a Hutt barge with her feet and face hurting. The smell of deathsticks clinging to her costume, overlaying the smell of her fruity perfume.

“How are we supposed to find Crystal in all this?” Vette asked, taking a step closer to Jhonnen.

Jhonnen looked around and pointed. “See the older twi’lek in costume but not dancing, the pink one over there?”

Vette nodded.

“If she isn’t Crystal I bet she can tell us where to find her.”

“I’m so lucky you grew up in a strip club,” Vette said, nudging him a little and then walking determinedly over to where the woman was standing watching the dancers with a critical eye. “Crystal?”

Crystal looked Vette up and down and adopted a speeder-salesman smile. “Yes, cute thing? You looking for work?”

“I have more experience with a pole than she does,” Jhonnen said, neatly bypassing the idea of Vette working for a hutt. “And I’d look great in that outfit.”

Vette snorted. “Gross.”

“I meant a literal pole, not… I used to play with the one at Panwa…” Jhonnen sighed. “We’re looking for Tivva.”

“Ah,” Crystal nodded. “I guess everybody has somebody that loves them. Tivva!”

Crystal left as a tall blue twi’lek without any tattoos on her uncomfortably stressed lekku made her way over. She looked like Vette if Vette had been taller, darker, bustier and completely given up on happiness.
Tivva sighed. “No women, no couples. And no, I don’t want to hear any argument.”

“Tivva?” Vette asked gently.

Jhonnen gave a thin smile. “I don’t think you really see your customers anymore, I suggest actually looking at this one.”

Tivva looked down at Vette and her expression cleared from hopelessness to shock and misery. “Ce’na?” Tivva asked, unsure. “What… you’re… you’re alive?”

Vette smiled. “Despite my best efforts. This is my friend. He’s, um, he’s a Sith lord.”

“Please don’t hold it against me,” Jhonnen said, smile warming. “Vette’s finally forgiven me at least.”

Tivva looked like she was going to cry but she chuckled a little. “Vette? Is that what you’re calling yourself these days. Sounds like a gangster from the tech sector.”

“Old days,” Vette said. “Long behind me.” She looked around at the other women in costumes like Tivva’s, at the men. “So I’m guessing this wasn’t a voluntary, uh, career move?”

Tivva shook her head and carefully wiped her eye to avoid smearing her makeup. “I’ve been here two years and it’s killing me. I kept thinking I’d get sold again, but I’m too old.” She gave Vette a desperate look. “Ce’na, you have to get me out of here.”

Vette gave Jhonnen an imploring look that he would have overturned governments to appease. “Wow. Okay, big favor? Can you buy my sister’s freedom.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Of course, Vette. You two wait here, catch up, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jhonnen left them and went to find Crystal. “I’m interested in purchasing Tivva.”

Crystal cocked an eyebrow. “She’s expensive.”

“A woman that beautiful doesn’t come cheaply,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “But she’s losing spirit fast.”

“That’s true. I’ll go get you a number.”

“Thank you.” Jhonnen took a seat and ordered a drink, occasionally looking over to where Tivva and Vette were talking. He couldn’t help but wish for his own reunions. He missed Kira less when Vette was near him, but he still missed her a lot. He could only imagine how much more comfortable he could make his mother with this stipend.

Crystal returned with a number and Jhonnen paid it without haggling. It was hard to think of it as being overcharged when it came to a young woman’s freedom. He walked back to Tivva and Vette and smiled. “Tivva, you’re free.”

“See why I hang out with a Sith lord?” Vette said, she gave Jhonnen a dazzling smile.

“I see,” Tivva said dejectedly. She folded her arms around herself for comfort.

“Tivva,” Vette said gently. “Did you actually hear him?”

Tivva started to nod and then stopped. She seemed to replay the moment in her head. “I… are you serious?”
“Yes,” Jhonnen said. “You’re free.”

She looked up at Vette and her jaw dropped open just a little before her lips spread into a smile. “I see! I need to get my stuff.” She threw her arms around Vette and squeezed. “I can never thank you enough, Ce’na, I’ll be in touch soon, okay?”

“Wait!” Jhonnen gave her some money. “This’ll get you off Nar Shaddaa and give you a starting place.”

Tivva took the money and left to get her stuff. Vette wrapped her arms around Jhonnen’s shoulders and gave him a quick hug. “That was amazing thank you!”

He hugged her back for the split second before they parted. “I’m just glad I could help.”

“Shall we go?”

He nodded. “Let’s get back to the ship between Pierce and Quinn murder each other.”

“I don’t know, that sounds like an ‘I win’ situation regardless of who comes out on top,” Vette teased with a smile.

Jhonnen snorted a laugh.

He felt Jaesa’s pain and confusion as soon as the small shuttle docked and excused himself from dinner to attend to it. In the tiny hangar, Jaesa looked smaller than ever. “My missions, to unite with the light-leaning sith… it was awful.” She buried her face in her hands and Jhonnen closed to distance between them so she only had to whisper to tell him how they’d suspected her of trying to trick them. How some of them attacked and how she’d had to defend herself.

At a lost, Jhonnen wrapped his arms around her, coming up to her nose and trying to bundled her against him. Jaesa’s arms hung limply at her sides for a moment before they shaking reached up to embrace him.

“You did the right thing,” he assured her. “That’s what matters.” He wasn’t sure he believed it but it seemed like what needed to be said.

“It means so much to me that you’re here.” Jaesa pulled away and wiped her eyes. “I hope your support helps drive the pain away.”

“Head to my quarters to recover, I’ll imply to Pierce and Quinn that you need a lesson or… something. They already think I’m fucking Vette so it can’t be that. But yeah. Something.” He gave her a thin smile. “I’ll make sure to save some of dinner for you.”

He returned to the lounge. Quinn had finished eating and returned to the cockpit. Pierce had taken his food back to his room. Vette looked up to him from the couch. “Jaesa needs further mentoring in the dark side of the Force,” he told Vette in case someone else was listening in. “I’ll be busy for the rest of the evening.”

“Okay,” Vette said.

Jhonnen headed into the galley and got a serving of the curry and rice they’d been having and headed into his room. Jaesa was slumped down against the wall, her knees bent to her nose and her arms wrapped around them. Jhonnen closed the door behind him and turned on the low lights before he moved to sit at her side.
“It’ll hurt,” he said quietly, setting the bowl in front of her. “It’ll hurt for a long time. Nothing makes killing people who didn’t deserve it hurt less. But… eventually you learn to move past it.”

“How long is this charade going to last?” Jaesa asked, her voice shaking. A tear splashed off her nose and onto her long skirt. “I hate it.”

Jhonnen looked at the floor. “I don’t know Jaesa, but try to remember that you’re not alone through it. I’m here.”

Jaesa nodded, and bundled more tightly against herself in response.
It was the longest stretch of downtime Jhonnen could remember having since he’d left Korriban. Jaesa recovered slowly, but at least sullen was an acceptable demeanor for a Sith apprentice to wear. During sparring, however, she seemed to be improving. Her focus, she said, had been improved despite her failure with the lightside Sith.

So that was good. Not great, but okay.

Vette had begun looking for her mother with Tivva’s help; Jhonnen had offered to help in whatever ways she needed and Vette had smiled a lot at that. There wasn’t much he could do though, just remain available if she needed anything.

Pierce and Quinn were both antsy to get back into the fight, but their antsiness was something Jhonnen was willing to tolerate if it meant everyone else got a chance to breathe.

It couldn’t last.

“My lord,” Quinn said, coming into the lounge where Jhonnen was reading while Vette tinkered. “We have an incoming message.”

“Play it,” Jhonnen said, unfolding himself. He turned his attention to the holoterminal and was disappointed but not surprised to see Darth Baras there.

“Apprentice,” said Baras. “It is customary to bow when in the presence of a member of the Dark Council.”

Jhonnen bowed, it wasn’t worth the hassle not to.

“Rise, my faithful servant.”

Jhonnen rose.

“We are at war. The Dark Council has placed me in charge, and battles are being waged across the galaxy.” Baras sounded unduly pleased about it. “You and Lord Draahg will oversee the most crucial confrontations. Draahg is already deployed, and now I shall unleash you.”

“Where am I going?” Jhonnen asked.

“We’ve caught wind of a secret plot on the planet Quesh that could win the planet for the Republic,” Baras said. “The conflict for resources on Quesh remains the most important of the fringe systems. This Republic plot must not succeed.”

“Then it won’t,” Jhonnen said flatly.

“Commander Ollien will brief you. He awaits your arrival at the forward command center on
Quesh.” Baras took a deep breath and exhaled it fondly. “I find myself nostalgic, sending my most prized apprentice off to war. This is the culmination of everything we’ve done.”

“Yes, master,” Jhonnen said, trying not to reflect on everything he’d done to get to this point. “More to come, I imagine.”

“Indeed, my friend. I bid you farewell.”

Jhonnen’s expression darkened immediately as the holo died. He looked at where Vette was seated on the couch and felt his stomach turn.

“You alright?”

“Just going to go have Quinn set our course,” Jhonnen said, trying to smile at her and unable to let himself lie.

He closed the cockpit door behind him and stepped over to Quinn’s chair so he could speak softly.

“My lord?” Quinn asked, open puzzlement on his face.

“Baras plans to kill me,” Jhonnen said simply, refusing to mince words. “When that happens, and you get the news that Jaesa and I are dead, I want you to prep the shuttle for Vette. Baras has plans for you, you’ll be safe but she…” he shook his head miserably. “Just help me with this, Quinn. Please.”

Quinn studied him for a moment, and the unthinkable happened. Quinn let his shoulders sag. “Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen smiled at him, an aching, miserable smile but a smile nonetheless. “If you can use my death to maneuver your way to greatness Quinn, do so. You’ve been Baras’s man from the beginning and I want only good things for you.”

“What if Jaesa survives and you do not, my lord?”

“I’ll instruct her personally. Thank you, Malavai. You’re been a true friend.”

Quinn opened his mouth like he had something more to say and then let his mouth close slowly.

“Something on your mind, Quinn?”

Quinn took a breath and then saluted. “Good luck, my lord. I hope you’re wrong.”

Jhonnen rested in his room until they reached Quesh, unable to muster the strength to put on a happy face and lie to anyone. Baras had called him ‘friend’, he’d been overly pleasant with him and the Force screamed of the dangers forthcoming.

Jhonnen rolled to his side and curled his arms around his pillow. Maybe this was for the best? He was never going to be able to beat Vitreous. He could be with his mother again. Maybe even with Kira. Quinn would prepare the shuttle for Vette and she’d fly off to be with her sister and hopefully her mother.

Quesh was controlled by the Republic-- maybe this was the opening to get Jaesa home. It could easily be believed that she’d died with him.

He swiped at his eye before a traitorous tear could form. He was Sith, he didn’t cry in the face of the inevitable.
“My lord, we’ve arrived,” Quinn said over the comm.


He was silent as they got inoculated against the atmosphere on the Orbital. He was silent on the shuttle down to the planet. He was silent as they reached the elevator and waited for it.

“Master?” Jaesa asked.

He exhaled. Oh yeah. Jaesa didn’t know what was going on. “I’ll explain after we’ve spoken to Commander Ollien. Bear with me until then.”

“Of course, Master,” Jaesa said.

They took the elevator down from the shuttle pad and made their way across the orange bog to where Commander Ollien was waiting for them. The commanders saluted and then fell to parade rest.

“Baras sent me,” Jhonnen said. “What’s going on?”

“Not a minute too soon. All indications are that the enemy has been ready to strike for sometime,” Ollien said. “If my reports are correct, they have us dead to rights. I’m thankful they’ve hesitated this long.”

“Let’s do this quickly then so I can deal with the problem,” Jhonnen advised.

“An elite Republic task force has found a cavern that tunnels beneath this command center. They’ve set explosives that will destroy the center and disrupt all Imperial military operations and communications on the planet.”

Baras was going to blow him up. Jhonnen wondered if the explosion would actually take out the command center or not. He could see it going either way with Baras.

“Where is this cavern?”

“I sent what soldiers I had to search for the cavern, but the survivors returned with blaster burns for their efforts. Here are rough coordinates of our best guess. Good luck.”

Jhonnen took the speeder and Jaesa and headed towards the coordinates. Before they got there, however, He stopped and dismounted.

“Master?” asked Jaesa, her brow furrowing with confusion.

Jhonnen frowned and exhaled. “I’ve become an inconvenience to Baras somehow, and I think he’s planning on killing me.”

Jaesa tensed. “What are we going to do?”

“I am going to walk into whatever trap this is and try and walk out again, but if I die I at least know that everyone else is taken care of and Baras has no reason to pursue anyone.”

Jaesa’s frown deepened like she could guess where this was going. “Master…”

“You are going to head to the nearest Republic facility and get yourself returned to the Jedi. They can protect you and teach you about the light side of the Force in ways I can’t.”
“I’m not a Jedi,” Jaesa protested. “I’m not… I don’t know what I am, but I can’t just let you walk smiling to your death, Jhonnen.”

He cracked a thin and brittle smile. “Who said anything about smiling?” He tried to smile at her and the expression cracked open on his mouth. “Of all the possibly moments you could have used my name, you picked this one? Jaesa, I’m going to die. I’m not about to ask you to walk into it with me. No one will pursue you. Quinn’ll think you’re dead and that’s what he’ll report back to Baras.”

“That’s not important.” Jaesa folded her arms stubbornly over her chest. “I won’t leave you.”

“What if I asked nicely?” Jhonnen asked. “You deserve a life without all the deception I’m putting you through.”

“Have you told Vette?”

Jhonnen froze for a second. He cleared his throat. “Quinn’s prepping the shuttle for her. Vette… Vette can take care of herself.”

Jaesa’s shoulders dropped. She gave him a desperately sad look and shook her head gently. “Fine. But you have to order me to leave you.”

“It’s an order, Jaesa. Head for the Republic encampment and don’t look back.”

Jaesa took off on the speeder and Jhonnen watched her go for a long moment, everything feeling very final, and then he made his way on foot to the coordinates Ollien had given him.

He carved his way through the Republic soldiers, morosity settling heavy in his arms and legs.

Vette and Jaesa would be safe though, that was what really mattered.

He’d be with his mother again soon.

Jhonnen reached the back of the cave and pointed one lightsaber at the men setting up the bomb, his danger sense ping ing like klaxon warnings in his ears.

“You’re gonna wanna step away from the bomb,” he advised, thinking maybe there was a chance he’d get to walk away from this. He still didn’t know how Baras was going to kill him. Maybe he’d get lucky and it’d be something he could fight his way out of. He was good at fighting his way out of things. Maybe he’d escape and somehow contact Vette and the two of them would leave the Sith far behind them.

An impossible dream but one he thought he’d like to keep.

“Sith,” the commander said sternly. “I’m prepared to detonate even if it means we all die. You’ve just wandered into your own funeral! Throwing the switch.”

His thumb went down. Jhonnen braced.

Nothing happened.

“What? No! Come on, detonate! Detonate!”

Jhonnen sighed. “Just go before I kill you.” He gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “I’m not in the mood for games.”
“No,” said the commander. “We live and die as heroes of the Republic. Men, but me time to reset the detonator.”

“So you can be mauled and then crushed,” Jhonnen said. “Assuming the explosion doesn’t kill you outright.”

“Uh, yeah,” said one of the men. “Wait a minute. The Sith’s right, that doesn’t sound too good.”

“Where’s your confidence, Corporal? All you have to do is kill the Sith, and we can blow this cavern from afar.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow.

The Corporal shook his head. “Yeah. I’m thinking killing the sith is a bit beyond our skill set.”

“I’m thinking the Corporal has a point,” said Jhonnen.

The Corporal rounded up the men and left, leaving Jhonnen alone with the commander. “Fools!” the man muttered. “This mission is critical! Work, blast it, work!” He kept pressing the button like it would change something.

Jhonnen sighed. “Just go home so we can both leave,” he said.

Swearing and muttering, the commander left.

Jhonnen turned to follow and stopped as his comm buzzed. He pulled out of his pocket and frowned at Draahg.

“Well well well, Well done,” Draahg said with an insufferable smirk. “Mission accomplished, eh?”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said flatly.

“Captain Trey-an was sent here by one of Baras’s Republic moles. The explosives he set up were not wired to the Captain’s detonator. I—”

“Have the real detonator,” Jhonnen interrupted. “Spare me the villain monologue, Draahg, I’m not in the mood.”

“You knew it was a trap?”

“I suspected,” Jhonnen looked at the bomb and tried to figure out if he could outrun the blast.

“You’re a fool if you walked into it anyway.”

“Can’t wait til it happens to you, pal.”

Draahg held up a hand, detonator clutched in his fist. “You let me worry about that.”

His thumb went down. Jhonnen threw himself as far from the bomb as possible and tucked into a ball. The blast destabilized the roof.

Jhonnen looked up and tried to shield his head as stone fell down at him.

Everything went black.

“Interest justified. Shall I revive?”
“Offer no help. We must be sure. His worth will be established by surviving the trek to safety. We will wait at the command center exactly one day for our proof.”

Something reached out to touch his thoughts. Kira! No, it wasn’t Kira. Someone else. Reaching for him like sweaty fingers slipping over his skin as they tried to pull him to safety. Jhonnen forced a boulder off of himself. He struggled from the pile of rocks and lay on the cavern floor.

Jhonnen’s ears were ringing. He opened his eyes and tried to reorient himself from the blast. He was on his back. The stone above him was the ceiling. And it was far enough away that it wasn’t immediately crushing him. Jhonnen felt something warm and soft around his midsection and opened his eyes to find a white light engulfing his stomach.

“Don’t move.”

“Jaesa?” Jhonnen pushed himself upwards and soft hands caught his shoulders and pushed him back down. “I ordered you back to the Republic.”

“Sorry, Master.”

“You are not,” he said petulantly, turning his head to look at her.

Jaesa gave him a small smile. She unfolded her hands and the white glow faded. “I’m not. Do you think you can stand?”

“I’m excited to find out.” Jhonnen picked himself up and found that his holo was crushed. Hopefully Quinn hadn’t put the plan into action yet. The thought of Vette, thinking he was dead and departing for neutral space, was sombering.

“I…” he exhaled. Everything hurt. “Did you see two pureblood sith on your way into the cave?”

“Yes?” Jaesa said hesitantly. “I assumed they were with Baras and waited for them to leave.”

“They’re waiting for me at the forward camp. Something about a test.” Jhonnen shook his head like an akk dog dispelling water. “I need all the allies I can get if I’m taking this war to Baras. We should go see what they want.”

He got to his feet and started to limp out of the cave, Jaesa walking close to his side in case he teetered over. He sat behind her on the speeder, holding her waist as the vibrations shook his battered legs and stomach.

The command center was still standing, so at least Baras hadn’t sacrificed the war effort on Quesh to kill one man. Jhonnen tried to figure if he was insulted or not and decided he wasn’t. He lead Jaesa into the building and squared his shoulders.

A pair of pureblood Sith acknowledged him as he entered their room, standing up from where they’d been sitting.

“We are impressed,” intoned the first one, taking his hood off, he was bald, wearing similar silver jewelry to Jhonnen himself. “You are worthy to be the Emperor’s Wrath.”

Jhonnen frowned. “I’m really in the mood for some kolto and not much else so if we could skip the melodrama, that’d be great.”
“We are your ally, friend,” said the Sith. “Look on me. I am Servant One; this is Servant Two.” Servant two did not remove his hood. “We are the Emperor’s Hand. The Dark Council runs blind. We alone oversee the Emperor’s will in the galaxy.”

“And what does the Emperor’s Hand want with me?” Jhonnen asked, standing a little straighter in hopes of keeping their attention off of Jaesa.

“You have been called,” said Servant Two.

Servant One nodded. “The Emperor tasks the Hand with a great undertaking, and you are to become his Wrath. Darth Baras seizes power against the Emperor’s wishes. He must be stopped.”

“Well,” Jhonnen shrugged. “I am currently all about kicking that man in the teeth.”

“The betrayer has motivated the Wrath,” observed Servant Two.

“Since the Treaty of Coruscant, the Emperor has withdrawn from the galaxy, preparing for a great calling,” explained Servant One. “Baras learned of this and now claims the Emperor speaks through him. If the Dark Council declares him the Voice of the Emperor, he will have supreme power over the Empire.”

“Well that’s not good for anybody,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest and trying not to wince as they moved.

“Some on the council truly believe,” said Servant One. “Others see an advantage in supporting him; and Baras plots against those who oppose him.”

“He’s probably plotting against those who support him too, the man just likes plotting against people.” Jhonnen shrugged. “If I can get close enough to kill him I can just kill him.”

“He is too powerful to confront now,” said Servant One.

“The Wrath must build before reaching pitch,” added Servant Two.

Servant One nodded. “Your crew awaits you at your ship. They have been informed of these developments. Baras means to force the council to bow. But he believes you to be dead. That is our advantage.”

Jhonnen wondered how long it would last. His thoughts turned to Quinn, he didn’t actually know how Quinn was taking all of this.

“Return to your ship,” instructed Servant One. “We will advise you what can be done to thwart him.”

Both servants bowed and Jhonnen mimicked the action before turning and leading Jaesa back out in Quesh’s twilight.

“Are you alright?” Jaesa asked out of the corner of her mouth.

“Fine,” Jhonnen lied. “It’s just that a lot has happened in the last couple of hours and I feel like someone took a meat tenderizer to me.”

“Rest when we get back to the ship.”

“Plan A,” Jhonnen promised. “I could sleep for a week.”
Vette was waiting when Jhonnen and Jaesa reached the ship. Jaesa went to prep Quinn and medbay, leaving Jhonnen alone with Vette’s glower.

“You knew!” she socked him in the arm and Jhonnen hissed with pain as her fist connected with one of his angry purple bruises. “You knew and you didn’t tell me!”

Jhonnen held up his hands peaceably. “And what would have changed if you’d known?” He asked softly. “Vette, it’s not like I let Jaesa actually go with me she’s here because she disobeyed a direct order.”

Vette threw herself into his arms and Jhonnen oofed against the sudden weight on his injuries. Vette squeezed him tight despite his hissing and he figured that was probably fair. His back hit the wall and he pressed his face to her shoulder, curling his hands around her to hold her close to him. “I couldn’t have walked into that trap if you’d been there…” he admitted. “And I figured that if I died Baras would’ve let the rest of you alone. I was willing to make that choice.”

“You don’t get to make choices that affect me without my permission,” Vette growled. “Quinn told me the shuttle was prepped on your orders.”

“That traitor,” he huffed. “I wanted to make sure you got away clean.”

“Asshole.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “I’m the worst.”

Vette let go of him and they walked to the medbay together. Jhonnen offered Quinn a small smile. Vette leaned against the wall near the door to watch.

“My lord,” Quinn said as Jhonnen removed his shirt. “When Servant One contacted the ship in your absence, I didn’t know what to make of it.”

“I can see how it would have been a shock.”

Quinn pushed Jhonnen to his back and cleaned away the blood. Then he started applying kolto to the mass of purple-black bruises on Jhonnen’s torso.

“So, it’s true?” Quinn asked. “You’ve been chosen as the Emperor’s Wrath. And now we fight against Darth Baras.”

Jhonnen nodded. He wondered where that put Quinn. He wondered if Quinn knew where that put Quinn. Probably they’d figure it out eventually.

When Quinn finished, Jhonnen stood up and limped a little less badly to the holoterminal to receive the Hand’s instructions. Servant One spoke briefly, instructing him to Belsavis and sending along the coordinates.

When the holo went dark, Jhonnen took stock of his crew.

Pierce rolled his shoulders back. “Didn’t care for old man Baras anyway.”

Jaesa nodded. “You have maneuvered even closer to the heart of the Empire. Great strides can be made.”

Vette was quiet the longest. She met Jhonnen’s eyes and sighed. “I don’t know. Those Hand weirdos kind of creep me out. You sure you want to sign up for this?”
He shrugged. “I’m not walking into this blind, Vette. I promise. But it seems like our best way forward.”

She frowned and gave him a determined nod.

“My lord,” Quinn bowed a little. “The ship is ready for departure. I’ll await your word.”

“Take us to Belsavis, Captain. We might as well start the process.”

A knock pulled Jhonnen from sleep. He opened the door and stood aside as Vette entered. “Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he replied.

The door closed and Vette moved to the bed. “Mind if I stay in here tonight?” she asked. “I’ve been doing some thinking.”

Jhonnen’s heart lodged itself in his throat, half with hope and half with terror. “Not at all. What’s on your mind?”

“We’ve been getting pretty close. I didn’t really notice until you almost blew yourself up, but… then you almost blew yourself up.”

He settled on the bed beside her. “I’m not going to do it again if I can help it. If that’s what you’re worrying about.”

“While I’m grateful, mostly I’ve been thinking about how… close we’ve gotten. It’s not something I would have thought a Sith was capable of. I’m just trying to figure out if I’m okay with it.”

“You’re the only person who can decide that,” Jhonnen shrugged. “Just… keep me posted?”

“I will,” Vette promised. “Tonight though, I just need to know you’re in one piece.” She laid down. Jhonnen scooted in beside her and wrapped his arms around her. Vette snuggled against him.

And killed the lights.
Chapter Summary

Jhonnen and Jaesa travel to the surface of Belsavis to be irritated by a Jedi, I mean deal with Baras's sister.

“My lord,” said Quinn as Jhonnen entered the cockpit. “I’ve just been informed that I’ve passed the trials for captain, second grade.”

“Well done,” Jhonnen said. “If we weren’t in the middle of something I’d suggest that we go celebrate.”

Quinn adopted a very small smile. “Unnecessary, my lord, but thank you. I don’t seek acknowledgment; it requires your approval to go into effect.”

“Just tell me where to sign.”

“Very good, My lord. I’ll have the datawork sent to you immediately.”

Jhonnen spent some time on the datawork, looking up to eat when Vette nudged him towards food. Things were as normal aboard the ship, with the understanding that everything had gotten much more serious. They were under the scrutiny of the Emperor’s Hand. They were going up against a Dark Council member.

But Vette pulled him into a game of dejarik and Jaesa joined him for combat training and it felt like they were trying to reassure him that he wasn’t alone.

Which was nice, but gave him the added feeling of pulling them all into trouble with him.

The Hand contacted them as they reached the Belsavis orbital.

“Wrath,” said Servant One. “Belsavis has been the Republic’s best kept secret. Hidden even from the Hand.”

“The disappeared reappear,” added Servant Two ‘helpfully.’

Servant One nodded in agreement. “The planet has been a prison for the galaxy’s most dangerous criminals and many presumed-dead Sith agents.”

“It houses the blood of the betrayer,” said Servant Two.

“Okay,” Jhonnen said slowly. “So what am I doing here?”

“It was Servant Two who realized what was happening on Belsavis,” said Servant One, apparently taking the long way around to the point. “When the prison manifests were leaked, Baras discovered that Darth Ekkage, his sister, was alive and imprisoned there.”

“The blood of the betrayer,” repeated Servant Two, more urgently this time.

“Darth Ekkage was a member of the Darth Council and leader of the Sith infiltrators. If she is
reunited with Baras, many more will bow to him.”

Jhonnen wondered what sphere she’d been in charge of. Was it possible that Ekkage’s replacement didn’t want her back? Could he call in more support?

Not without letting Baras in on what he was doing.

“So no family reunions, got it.”

“The betrayer’s blood must be spilled,” agreed Servant Two.

Blood was tricky with a lightsaber, hopefully Servant Two didn’t mean literally.

“To crack the door to Belsavis, the Emperor has directed his guardsmen to coordinate extractions from the prison planet. A clever cover,” said Servant One. “Get authorization to shuttle to the surface and compel the Imperials to reveal Baras’s agents. Stop them from releasing Darth Ekkage.”

The conversation ended with Servants One and Two flickering out of sight and Jhonnen frowning at the space where they’d been. “Jaesa,” he said. “I think it’s you and me again this time. Ekkage’ll probably put up a fight and I don’t like the sound of ‘Leader of the Sith Infiltrators’.”

Vette studied his face with a scowl and Jhonnen brought up both hands in his own defense. “Honestly, I just think she and I have a better chance at dealing with a former Dark Councilor. Quinn, Pierce, make yourselves useful to our men on the ground. Vette, handle resupply and generally keep an eye on the ship.”

“Yes, my lord,” Vette said grumpily.

Jhonnen forced himself to smile. “I promise, it’s not like last time.”

He, Jaesa, Quinn and Pierce rode down to the surface together in silence. Jaesa practiced sprawling, leaning back in her seat with her knees apart. It didn’t look particularly natural but she was trying and that was all Jhonnen could ask for.

What made him uncomfortable was the way Pierce watched her. Sniffing for weakness no doubt. And he’d find it. Jhonnen wasn’t sure he’d bought the excuse Jhonnen had fed him when he’d almost discovered Jaesa’s plan to align with the light-leaning Sith. Pierce would sniff out Jaesa’s ‘weakness’ and use it as a weapon against Jhonnen to leverage himself to greater heights.

Something would have to be done about it.

They set down on the ground in light snowfall and Quinn and Pierce went one way to present themselves to the people in charge while Jhonnen and Jaesa went the other to sniff out Baras’s plot to free his sister.

“I’m looking for information about a mission to break out Darth Ekkage and the Sith Infiltrators,” Jhonnen said once he’d found the right colonel.

“That’s Lord Melicoste’s mission,” she told him. “He and his team have been permitted to venture deep within the Belsavis prison. The order came directly from Darth Baras and you don’t have clearance to know more.”

“I’ll go find Melicoste, then. Thank you for your help.”
“My lord, wait,” said the captain standing to the Colonel’s left. “I believe it is my duty to aid in any way I can.”

Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest and nodded.

“Stand down, Captain Oklart!” snapped the Colonel.

“I will not,” he snapped back. “My lord, Lord Melicoste invaded the prison this morning with a squadron of commandos. He’s placed them throughout this level of the prison to cover his descent and to secure the area for his exit.”

“Do you know where he’s going?” Jhonnen asked.

“We don’t know exactly where Melicoste is headed, my lord. But Lieutenant Kaid, the leader of his commandos, might. Trouble is, Kaid’s men stationed in this sector will report any activity. If you’re unwelcome, they’ll warn him and Melicoste.”

“I appreciate the warning.”

The Colonel glowered at her captain. “You’ve just signed a death warrant for your fellow soldiers. That’s treason. I’m reporting you both to High Command. Darth Baras will know what transpired here.”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose and then reached out a hand and curled it around her throat. He looked ahead, knowing that if he saw Jaesa’s horror and disappointment he’d falter and fail. But he couldn’t let her warn Baras. He needed every scrap of advantage he could get his hands on.

The body hit the floor.

“Your decisiveness is enviable,” said the captain. “I will cover your back, Sith. And Darth Baras will be none the wiser, you have my word. If Kaid’s commandos don’t warn him, you’ll surprise him in his bunker. He’ll tell you where Lord Melicoste is headed.”

“Thank you,” Jhonnen said. He turned and left, Jaesa on his heels.

“Did you have to kill her, Master?” Jaesa asked in a quiet voice.

Jhonnen nodded. “We can’t let anyone warn Baras before we’re ready. That’s going to involve doing the wrong thing, occasionally.” His stomach twisted uncomfortably. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Together they found Kaid’s bunker and ruthlessly hunted down his commandos before anyone could get back to warn him.

Kaid, a human male, narrowed his eyes as Jhonnen and Jaesa cornered him. “My men and I are here in support of Lord Melicoste. If you’re responsible for this, you will answer to him.”

“I’m actually looking for the man,” Jhonnen said. “Where is he?”

“Damn these Sith games,” swore Kaid. “Lord Melicoste proceeded into the high security sector of Belsavis. He is after the records room of the blown Republic prison there. He seeks the location of a former Dark Council member.”

“Thank you,” Jhonnen said.

“All right. What now?”
“Do I have to kill you to keep you from warning Melicoste that I’m coming?”

Kaid held his hands up. “Absolutely not, Sith—I mean, my lord.” He bowed. “I shall report into Melicoste as scheduled and not before.”

“Excellent,” Jhonnen said. He took Jaesa and left, mounting up their speeder to try and find the records room.

The records room was well guarded, tucked into high security exactly as Jhonnen had been told. Once they got inside, they found that the place was more heavily guarded by Melicoste’s men then by the Republic, a state of affairs that didn’t last long after Jhonnen and Jaesa arrived. Jhonnen left no survivors, jaw clenched so tightly it hurt, but assured that no one was going to warn Melicoste that he was coming.

Then, Jhonnen stepped over the corpses to the door to the records room. It was sealed fast. Jhonnen kicked it out of frustration.

“Hello out there!” someone called from the other side. “A word, please. I am Jedi Master Somminick Timmns.”

“Unfortunately,” Jhonnen said. “I’m not a Jedi of any sort. And I sort of need in there.”

“I can sense your presence and nature. I even know who you are. Many years past, I was the padawan of Master Nomen Karr. He and I forged a bond through the Force. I know about your confrontation with Master Karr, and what you did to him.”

Jhonnen looked at Jaesa and sighed. “Trust me, it was all more complicated than you think.”

“Ever since you defeated Karr and took Jaesa Willsaam, the Jedi Council has been keeping track of you. We know you are no longer aligned with Darth Baras and are, in fact, here to stop Lord Melicoste from freeing Darth Ekkage.”

“And how the fuck do you know that?” Jhonnen asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s… complicated,” said Master Timmns cheekily. “It’s a dead end, Lord Jhonnen. To follow Lord Melicoste, you need information from the computers in this room, but the door has been fused. I came for the same reason. I got the information, but Lord Melicoste’s commandos trapped me in here.”

“So tell me where to go.”

“Great idea,” said Master Timmns dryly. “I can be satisfied that my mission was a success, as I slowly die of starvation. No thanks.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Jhonnen asked.

“I do. Our combined strength, striking the door from both sides simultaneously, could break the physical seal.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’, ” Jhonnen said.

“There’s a fail-safe force field that makes even that impossible. Now, if you were to take out that force field…”

“I get it,” Jhonnen sighed. “I’ll be just a moment then.”
“There are several power stations feeding this installation. Destroy them, and the force field will not engage, then you and I can break through this door and you can access the prisoner reports.”

“Seems fair enough,” Jhonnen shrugged his shoulders. “And decently clever. Go you.”

“Delighted to impress,” said Timmns dryly. “I’ll be waiting. After all—”

“—where are you going to go,” Jhonnen finished for him. “Sit tight, I guess.”

Jhonnen and Jaesa headed outside again and dispatched the trio of power stations that fed into the building. Then they headed back inside to break Master Timmns out of the records room.

It wasn’t going to be as simple as this though, Jhonnen suspected. Jedi had a way of complicating matters that was almost as impressive as the Sith. He stole a glance at Jaesa, her expression placid.

Maybe this was an opportunity. Maybe Master Timmns could get her back to the Republic and Jaesa would no longer have to live this lie Jhonnen had constructed for her.

He could come up with some lie as to why Jaesa was no longer with them. He could say Darth Ekkage had killed her.

Pierce and Quinn would by that. Particularly if Jhonnen injured himself before returning to the ship. And he could bear a little pain for Jaesa.

They reached the door and Jhonnen kicked it to announce himself. “The power stations are down.”

“Great,” said Master Timmns. “With the force field down, we should be able to break the door open. On three. One… two… three.”

Jhonnen hurled the Force into the door and it retracted. He was left facing a tall, bald mirialan.

Master Timmns gave him a measured smile. “Well done, Sith! Now…” he stopped and looked at Jaesa. “Wait a minute, you’re Jaesa Willsaam, aren’t you?”

Jaesa nodded, a thin smile on her mouth. “That’s right, Master Timmns.”

“I thought I sensed a serene and tempered presence through the door. Any regrets, my dear? Joining up with this rogue?”

Jaesa shook her head. “Most days, no. I believe all beings have a great capacity to change.”

“Aw, I’m flattered,” Jhonnen said with a sincere smile and an eye roll to distract Timmns from it. He was flattered that Jaesa didn’t hate running around with him, but her complacency with it was… concerning. He needed her to look for an out so she’d catch the opportunities he’d missed. She deserved more than the lie her life had become. “But we need that information on Darth Ekkage.”

“Now before you think to fight me, Sith, I suggest you inspect the computer banks in here.”

“I’ve got no intention of fighting you,” Jhonnen said flatly, following Timmns into the records room. He stopped in his tracks and stared at the smoking wreckage of the computers. He turned to Timmns. “Why the fuck?” he snapped.

“I did it to make sure no one else sent by Darth Baras could succeed. That is, after you and I stop Lord Melicoste,” Timmns said easily. “Now I’m the only one who knows where to go. Our goals are one, even if our motives vary. I suggest a partnership.”
Jhonnen looked at Jaesa. “Are all Jedi this roundabout?”

Jaesa shrugged. “Our goals do align with his, Master.”

Jhonnen groaned. “Fine, but stop the stupid games. I don’t want to kill you, I am not planning on killing you. I just want to deal with Ekkage and get off this frigid deathtrap.”

“All I’ll tell you is that we’re headed for Deep Prison. The exact location of Darth Ekkage’s cell remains my secret,” said Timmns. “In good faith, I’ll point you to her assassins. You can make sure they remain locked up while I get access to the Deep Prison.”

“And I should just trust you because…” Jhonnen cocked his brow.

“Because it’s practical, and I am nothing if not practical. You might get the assassins to back down without a fight. Me? Not so much. Here are the coordinates.”

Jhonnen received them and nodded, still irritated.

“Holo me when you’re done, and we’ll get together and face the Darth. It really will take both of us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jhonnen grumped. “Spare me, will you? I’ll call when the assassins are dealt with.”

Timmns left first and Jhonnen pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“Are you alright, Master?” Jaesa cocked an eyebrow that on any other face would have come across as teasing.

He smiled back despite himself and let his shoulders slump. “I just hate complications on things that are already fucking complicated,” he told her.

“Master Timmns is just being practical. He doesn’t know you’re… you and not some other Sith lord.”

“I know, and I can’t really afford to let it get out that I’m me and not some other Sith lord but it’s still a pain in the ass.” He shook his head and squared his shoulders. “Let’s go deal with these damned assassins, shall we?”

It would have been easier if Belsavis weren’t a bitch and a half to navigate, but the Republic had purposefully built their prison to be confusing. Jaesa and Jhonnen turned to make course adjustments more often than Jhonnen would have liked.

Eventually, however, they found the cell block where Ekkage’s assassins were being held. Inside, they found more of Melicoste’s men and Jhonnen killed them all as quietly and efficiently as he could to keep them from alerting their boss that he was being hunted.

Jhonnen took a moment to sigh. “It seems like every other Sith lord has a plethora of troops and apprentices.”

“Wouldn’t more eyes simply make our deception more difficult?” Jaesa asked.

“Yes,” Jhonnen complained. “But just once I’d like to be able to throw a wave of my own soldiers at a problem instead of having to do it all ourselves.”

Jaesa frowned at him.
“I know, I know, living people. Which is why I’ll probably never look in to taking over a legion myself but it would be convenient.”

They found the cell with the assassins and Melicoste’s people, Jhonnen shooed Jaesa behind him with one hand and made his way up the shallow slope to the cell.

“Stay your triggers, Imperial,” said the assassin who was clearly in charge. “I want to know what this one intends.”

Jhonnen had not expected a chance to talk. “I am the Emperor’s Wrath,” he said. “Here on his command.”

There was no reason for them to believe him, not with Baras, the man trying to rescue them, claiming to have the Emperor’s backing. Jhonnen remained tensed for a fight.

“There is truth in your words,” said the assassin. “I can feel it. But I sense hostility towards my mistress, Darth Ekkage.”

“Only on behalf of her brother. If freed, Ekkage will join with Baras and Baras will subvert the Emperor’s will. They and everyone they’re working with have to die.”

The lead assassin nodded thoughtfully. “Then I break my alliance with the offenders. My fellow infiltrators and I pledge our support to you and the Emperor. We will slaughter these commandos and then free our remaining brothers.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Sounds like… yes. Do so.”

Being Sith was hard and made him feel like he needed a shower.

He forced himself to watch as the infiltrator crushed the life from the commandos. He forced his expression to blank at the strangled whimpers, and then the lead assassin turned to face his men. “My fellows, we are not only free of these cells, we have been liberated from the rule of Darth Ekkage.” He turned to Jhonnen. “We will not interfere when you face Darth Ekkage, my lord. You have my word.”

“Good. You will likely be summoned by the Emperor’s hand once free of this place.”

“We will answer that call,” the lead assassin assured him. “May your strength surge when you face the mistress.”

The assassins left, heading off to free the rest of their number.

Jaesa gave him a very small attempt at a smile. “It looks like you now have assassins to ‘throw’ at people.”

Jhonnen met her attempt at a smile with one of his own. “Thank you for trying to find a bright side.”

He pulled out his holo and contacted Timmns. “So the assassins are dealt with, how’s your end?”

“Good and bad,” said Timmns in a voice probably designed to get under Jhonnen’s skin. “I found a route into the Deep Prison, but it was a struggle. And, unfortunately, the way collapsed behind me. Bad luck that. You’ll have to find a different route to this level.”

“Awesome,” Jhonnen groaned. “And what are you going to do while I find it?”
“Wait for you, most likely. Sending the coordinates for our rendezvous. From there it’s quick to Darth Ekkage’s cell. Good luck, Sith. I hope you make it. Can’t really do this alone.”

Jhonnen tucked his comm away. “It’s a good thing I grow stronger from my hatred,” he told Jaesa. “Because I have a hard time believing the way just collapsed behind a Jedi Master without help.”

“He needs us to face Darth Ekkage.”

“Yes but if he only needs an edge he wouldn’t mind us getting worn down so that if I were a typical Sith and going to try and murder him afterwards he’d have an easier time of it.”

“What’s happened to Master Timmns?”

“I don’t not think it’s what’s happening,” Jhonnen replied. “Regardless, we should find another path to the Deep Prison.”

“I wonder what Pierce and Quinn are up to,” Jaesa said. “There’s more Imperial activity on the planet than I had thought.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Quinn’ll file a complete report when we get back. Pierce’ll probably just tell us about it on the shuttle home.” He wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder, offer a small squeeze to reassure them both.

He hooked his thumb into his belt loop instead. “Come on. Someone back at that last base camp might have some idea of how to access the lower levels.”

The answer was a Rakatan teleporter that felt like it was running a current under Jhonnen’s skin. He closed his eyes and when he opened them he was in a different cave, one beneath the planet’s surface. Jhonnen shuddered and stood back to wait for Jaesa, trying not to picture all the ways such a device could go wrong.

He smiled with relief when Jaesa zapped into place.

“That was… strange,” she told him.

“You have a gift for understatement,” Jhonnen replied. He lead her out into the dark; it wasn’t a proper cave, because when he looked up the sloped ceiling was cracked enough that light pierced through, but it did little to alleviate the gloom.

They skirted around the loosed beasts as best they could, heading for the rendezvous where they were supposed to meet with Master Timmns.

Instead of Timmns, they found his datapad. Jhonnen growled under his breath as he stooped to pick it up and the growl stopped when the datapad flickered to life.

Sith, I regret that I am unable to rendezvous. I intercepted a communication from Lord Melicoste—his forces have regrouped and are on their way to your location. I will attempt to head them off, but you must proceed immediately. Darth Ekkage is in cell block 77-Z. Lord Melicoste has already arrived there. If I survive I will join you, otherwise you’ll be flanked. It amuses me to think you’ll be happy to see me.

Jhonnen pocketed the datapad to return to the Jedi Master later. “We need to hurry,” he told Jaesa.

“What’s happened to Master Timmns?”
“If we’re very lucky he’ll meet us in Ekkage’s cell, otherwise he’s cutting down on the people who are about to flank us,” Jhonnen said, hurrying into the prison.

He launched himself into Melicoste’s men, a ballet of severed limbs and knee-to-nose combat. Once they were down, Jhonnen scurried into the cell block.

He slowed his pace as he got closer to the cell and, expending great energy, cloaked himself and Jaesa enough that they could get in and behind something.

“Had my brother sent anyone else,” said Ekkage. “I would destroy them for practice.”

Jhonnen drew both of his lightsabers but didn’t ignite them, waiting for a good chance to strike and privately hoping Timmns would burst in and give him the distraction he needed.

Damn it, he did not like hoping that he was going to see Timmns.

The nice thing about leaving two Sith together for any length of time was that there was a non-zero chance of one of them getting electrocuted. And that percentage went up when one of them had just been freed from stasis and was naturally crotchety. Melicoste and Ekkage, predictably, started to bicker.

“I will tell your master, my brother, the future Voice of the Emperor, that you died like a dog.” Ekkage snarled, lightning crackling from her fingertips.

Jhonnen moved out of cover. “That would rely entirely on seeing him again.”

Ekkage’s head snapped up and over to where Jhonnen was standing. “Now, exactly who are you?”

“He’s with me, Ekkage,” said Timmns, coming up from behind in what Jhonnen was sure he thought of as a dramatic entrance.

Ekkage sighed. “Nomen Karr’s sad little whelp. This just gets better and better.” She looked at Jhonnen. “If you’re aligned with this Jedi, you are a fool and a traitor.”

“Been called worse by better, lady,” Jhonnen said with an insolent shrug of his shoulders.

“A Sith who finds himself working toward the same goal as a Jedi should realize something is wrong.”

“Actually,” Jhonnen said with a sharp smile. “Given that the Jedi want to wipe out the Sith and every Sith has at least one Sith they could do without, I’m amazed it doesn’t happen more often.”

“Whelp! Baras will be declared the Voice of the Emperor, then he and I shall dominate the Empire. I’m not going to miss that.” Ekkage curled one hand to a fist and then summoned Melicoste’s lightsaber to her. “I just destroyed a Lord with a mere flick of my wrist. Don’t blink, I’m about to do it again.

Ekkage shot a bolt of lightning from her fingers that Jhonnen absorbed with one of his lightsabers. Timmns rushed in hammering against Ekkage’s defenses. She slashed out at him and he staggered back. Jhonnen went low, forcing her to jump and then rolling behind her. Jaesa battered Ekkage’s defenses with everything in the room that wasn’t bolted down and some that was. Ekkage caught Jhonnen by the throat, and shocked him, forcing him to drop his lightsabers as he screamed. His teeth chattered together. And then the pain stopped, and Ekkage slumped to kneeling.

Jaesa pulled her saberstaff out of her back.
“Have my powers waned as I languished here?” asked Ekkage, turning to stare at the Apprentice who had struck the defeating blow.

Jhonnen worked his jaw to make the buzzing stop. “Probably,” he lopped her head off.

Timmns made an affronted noise.

“Master!” Jaesa said.

“She was defeated, done,” said Master Timms. “You shouldn’t have killed her like that. We could have locked her away again.”

“The Empire is on Belsavis freeing prisoners. Even if they’re not working for Baras somebody is going to stumble through here and wake her up ‘for the good of the Empire’. Jhonnen’s voice was gravelly and strained and he hooked his lightsabers onto his belt and then rubbed his tender neck. “Also, I don’t have to defend myself to you.”

He did have to defend himself to Jaesa.

“The logic is sound,” said Timmns. “But it still feels wrong. I hope you’ll come to see that to defy your former master, you have to walk a different path.”

“You don’t know step one of the path I walk, Jedi.” Jhonnen said, suddenly tired. “Also, I have a proposition for you.”

Timmns raised an eyebrow.

Jhonnen cleared his throat and spat out blood. “Take Jaesa back to the Republic.”

“Master!” Jaesa objected.

Jhonnen held up a hand to stop her. “She’s my apprentice in name only, everything I did to Nomen Karr I did to keep from having to kill her. But right now we have a unique opportunity.” He rubbed his neck. “I can tell my crew that Darth Ekkage killed her and she can go someplace where she doesn’t have to pretend to use the dark side.”

Timmns blinked in surprise.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Jaesa said stubbornly. “We may make strides in the Empire yet.”

“The higher I ascend up the power structure, the more eyes there’ll be on us. Pierce already knows to much.”

“You need me,” Jaesa argued.

“That’s… I mean yes but this is more important than that.”

“It would be a chance to come home, Jaesa,” said Master Timmns.

“This is my home.” Jaesa muttered.

Jhonnen blinked at her. “What was that?”

“This is my home,” Jaesa said firmly. “I can’t return to the Jedi now. Not after what happened to Master Karr and I can’t just abandon you in your fight with Baras.”
“You’re impossible.”

“Take my contact information,” Timmons said. “And if you decide to leave later, we’ll think of something.”

“Thank you, Master Timmons,” Jaesa said.

Timmons looked back at Jhonnen. “Now, what’s to be between us? Do we part as friends or as enemies?”

“Neither,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “We part as men who worked together once. I’ll bear you no ill will, and I’m in your debt for being willing to help Jaesa, but I also don’t want to risk meeting for caf or whatever.”

Timmons chuckled and nodded. “I can accept that. Good luck to you, Sith.”

Timmons left and Jhonnen dropped the rest of his guard, rubbing his ruined throat with both hands.

“I’m pleased you parted on… okay terms with him,” Jaesa said.

Jhonnen nodded and croaked. “I live to please. Let’s go home.”

“Are Quinn and Pierce back?” Jhonnen asked as they returned to the Tide.

Vette gave him a concerned look because he was croaking. “No. What happened to you?”

“Darth Ekkage shot lightning directly into his throat,” Jaesa answered. “He needs some kolto and a chance to rest.”

Vette’s mouth dropped open and her eyes went wide.

“I’m fine,” he rasped at her.

“He’s not,” Jaesa said flatly.

“We’ll get Quinn’s opinion when he’s back,” Jhonnen said. “I have to report in to the Hand first.”

Vette frowned. “Yeah, maybe you don’t want to sound like a Frog-Dog. They can wait a little bit.”

Jhonnen opened his mouth.

“Besides,” Vette pressed. “They might want us to head out immediately. We should wait for the Brute and Captain No-Fun to get back.”

Jhonnen gave Vette an exasperated smile and sighed, knowing he’d lost. “I’m taking a nap then,” he said. He looked at Vette. “Wanna come?”

Vette followed him into his room and closed the door behind them. She flopped over onto the bed, head on the pillow and eyes on his as he curled in beside her.

“What happened?” she asked again. And then held up a finger before he could start to describe anything. She pulled his datapad off of the bed stand and had him type the whole thing up. When he’d finished, she scooted closer to him. Gently, Vette set one hand on his ruined throat. He smiled at her and closed his eyes, wondering if he really could get a nap in before Quinn and Pierce returned.
The sound of the primary airlock opening told him he couldn’t and he sighed.

Vette caught his arm as he started to get out of bed. He turned to look at her.

“Stay with me for a bit,” she said.

Jhonnen almost argued. Instead he curled back up in the bed. “Yeah, okay.”

Vette moved her hand from his arm to his shirt collar and rested her cheek on his shoulder. “What was your mother like?”

Jhonnen took a deep breath, like he was on the verge of drowning. His chest felt tight. “She was… clever,” he said at length, voice crackling. “We ran when I was four and she went straight for the Hutts. There aren’t a lot of… of Force-blind purebloods. There are fewer as pretty as my mom was and as willing to… use… that beauty.” He reached up with the arm Vette wasn’t lying on and pulled his hand over his face. “She taught me to be self-reliant, smart and sneaky. I loved her… a lot.’’

“I don’t really remember my mother,” Vette said quietly. “All this looking for her has just reminded me of that. I’m terrified that she doesn’t remember me.”

Jhonnen curled both of his arms around her and squeezed her close. “I’m sure she’ll remember you and Tivva. It’s just a matter of finding her, Vette.”

“Thanks… Jhonny.”

He resisted the urge to kiss her cheek. “How long do you think we can lay here before they get antsy?”

“You’re a Sith Lord. We can lie here as long as you want.”

Jhonnen looked up at the ceiling. “I knew there had to be at least one perk to this job.”

They lay there for a long while. When Vette had dozed off, Jhonnen slid carefully out from under her and headed for the lounge.

“You’ve been busy,” said Pierce.

Jhonnen couldn’t tell if his tone was approving or mocking and settled for glaring at the lieutenant. “I’d appreciate it if we kept the noise down around my chamber.”

“She all worn out?”

“I’d also appreciate it if you stopped speculating, Lieutenant,” Jhonnen said tersely. He went to find Quinn. “Captain, how was Belsavis?”

“My lord,” Quinn stood and gave a shallow bow. He produced a kolto stim and the applicator from the console and injected the serum into Jhonnen’s throat.

Jhonnen swallowed a couple of times, the pain was gone.

“Thank you, Captain. Now, Belsavis?”

“Lieutenant Pierce and I were charged with some of the work to free ‘The Dread Masters’, a sextet of powerful Force users. Everything went more or less according to plan.”
Jhonnen nodded. “Jaesa and I were successful as well. Plot a course away from Belsavis, I’ll contact the Hand and get our new bearing.”

“My Lord.” Quinn returned to his chair and Jhonnen headed out to the lounge where the holoterminal was waiting.

He activated it and looked up at Servant Two when he manifested in the stream of light. “The Wrath Ascends,” said Servant Two, somehow capitalizing the words.

“Okay…,” Jhonnen said. “Darth Ekkage has been dealt with.”

“Yes,” said Servant One with a nod. “With Baras’s sister silenced, our enemy grows angry. But he has other endeavors that must fail. The key Dark Council member who opposes Baras’s attempt to be named Voice of the Emperor is Darth Vowrawn. Vowrawn is spearheading the battle for Corelia, and Baras secretly undermines his efforts. He hopes to orchestrate Vowrawn’s failure or death.”

“He’s willing to risk the war he started?” Jhonnen asked.

“His personal goals override the war,” answered Servant One.

“The pendulum swings with Vowrawn’s weight,” helped Servant Two.

Jhonnen gave what he hoped was a sagely nod.

“Vowrawn alone holds the defiant council members together,” continued Servant One. “Baras’s attempts to weaken his Corelia campaign must be thwarted. The Empire’s Armegeddon Battalion was to be assigned to Corelia, but Baras redirected it to Hoth, where it’s strength is being wasted. General Griest commands. He must be convinced to abandon Baras’s orders and take Armageddon Battalion to Corelia.”

Jhonnen gave a small sigh. “To Hoth then. Again.”

“I served with General Griest for a time, my lord. As tough as they come. And stubborn,” Pierce volunteered as he came into the room.

“Resistance cannot be accepted,” said Servant One sternly. “Armageddon Battalion must be reassigned. Do whatever it takes to make it happen.”

The terminal went dark and Jhonnen headed back into the cockpit. “Hoth, Quinn.” He sighed. “And do you have any idea how we might find General Greist?”

Quinn frowned. “Hoth is a big place, my lord. It could take a long time to find Griest.”

“I was worried you’d say that. We’ll contact Slinte on the ground then, maybe he doesn’t know about my falling out with Baras.”

“Excellent thinking, my lord.” Quinn said, his eyes dead ahead. “Of course, Baras is rather tough on underlings. Assuming Slinte hasn’t been disposed of, he’s your best lead.”

Jhonnen studied Quinn, and let his shoulders drop a little. Quinn had been Baras’s man. Maybe that had changed since they’d been contracted by the Hand. Surely Quinn’s loyalty was to the Empire more than to any one man.

“When we land, Captain, I want you to join me in locating the Armageddon Battalion. You’ve got
more experience with the military than I do and… frankly I know you didn’t blackmail the General and there’s a non-zero chance Pierce did at some point or another.”

Quinn raised an eyebrow, his mouth thinned to a line.

“I’m just saying that blackmail is how he got here so I’m not ruling it out.”

“My lord, if Pierce is attempting to blackmail you I will have him… court-martialed immediately.”

Jhonnen remembered keenly that Quinn had been threatening to shoot an underling when they’d met. There was a non-zero chance of him prowling through the corridors to plant a blaster bolt between Pierce’s eyes given proper provocation.

Or even the appearance of an excuse.

“He’s not,” Jhonnen assured him. “If he was, he’d be dead.”

Quinn nodded his agreement and Jhonnen let the vehemence with which Quinn was willing to bluster about Pierce be some small sign that maybe his loyalties were actually to Jhonnen. It probably wasn’t true, but Jhonnen wanted to hope.

“Master?” Jaesa said from the cockpit door. “Do you have a moment?”

“For you? Always,” Jhonnen nodded to Quinn and then turned to follow Jaesa. She led him back to her room and closed the door behind them.

She smiled and Jhonnen, on instinct, smiled back. “What is it?”

“Master,” she said, and he chose to let it go. “One of the Sith I tried to connect to has contacted me. It seems he’s ready to trust us!”

“Oh?”

“His name is Lord Emmoridg. He’s an overseer on Korriban who secretly trains hand-selected acolytes to follow the light.”

Emmoridg. Sith and their stupid, stupid names. “There’s a job that’ll get you killed,” Jhonnen said, remembering Korriban all too clearly.

“That’s why he’s seeking me out,” Jaesa said. “Emmoridg knows he won’t last long and he’s hoping we’ll look after his disciples. Help consolidate their power and guide them in the galaxy.” She stood a little straighter. “With your permission, I’d like to reach out to them and keep in contact.”

It was risky as fuck and Jhonnen frowned. “Jaesa, we should be focusing on getting you home,” he said in a low voice. “Pierce is already suspicious. Quinn has eyes on the back of his head.”

“Master, while I am here I want to do some good. I will secretly keep track of them, without exposing us. In case they can become a resource in the future.”

It was on the tip of Jhonnen’s tongue to point out that that was very Sith of her, but he choked it down. He was breaking her further. Every day she was kept within the Empire, a little more of the Jedi Padawan died.

Jaesa smiled at him again. This time a fierce, determined smile. “Thank you, Master.”
“I… uh… yeah. Okay.” He hadn’t given her an answer. But he smiled at her. “Best of luck.”
Equivelancy

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen is sent to the mysterious planet Voss and kills a man in cold blood.

Hoth was still unpleasant and Jhonnen had a nagging feeling that something was going to go wrong. He put Jaesa on alert and left the ship with Quinn as his backup. Now, on the shuttle down, Jhonnen’s bad feeling was growing.

They landed and located Slinte within Dorn Base. He gave Jhonnen a terrified look.


“Baras wants you dead, Commander,” Jhonnen lied. “Your only chance to save yourself is to tell me where to find General Griest.”

“Oh! I know where he is,” and then the mirth died on Slinte’s face. “But… uh… Baras expressly told me their assignment is a secret and that he’d… kill me if I told anyone.”

“And you think that extends to his favorite apprentice?” Jhonnen asked, cocking his brow.

“I… see.” Slinte swallowed. “Well, I have no reason to doubt you, my lord. General Greist and his men have been ordered to sit tight in a cave system not far from here. Here are the coordinates.”

Jhonnen took them, feeling rotten about the way he’d just signed the man’s death warrant. But it was his life or the lives of his crew and Jhonnen knew how that weighed out. “Thank you.”

“Glad I could be of assistance, my lord,” Slinte said, wandering off to hope that he hadn’t gotten himself killed.

Jhonnen and Quinn left the base without a word to anyone else and headed for the cave system where the battalion was waiting. The soldiers in the cave looked impossibly bored. The rattle of blasterfire hitting durasteel targets echoed. Jhonnen and Quinn pressed in deeper looking for the General.

They found him speaking with a captain about the state of the men.

Antsy. The men were antsy.

“I have to assume our greater purpose here will be revealed,” said Greist. “The order to hole up came from the highest authority.”

“The order to hole up is another example of sith in-fighting getting Imperials killed,” Jhonnen said. “You and your men are needed on Corellia.”

The General sized Jhonnen up and found him (a lean 5’5 and 160lbs) wanting. “My orders are from Darth Baras himself. On whose authority are you operating?”

“The Emperor’s Hand. But more importantly, Corellia will be lost without Armageddon battalion
and that’s what Darth Baras is counting on.”

"You put me in a bad position.” Greist said, tacking a “my lord” to the end of it. “Disobeying the Dark Council is equivalent to treason.”

“General,” said the Captain. “We’ve been in a lot of scrapes. Does this feel right to you? What could possibly make this block of ice more important that Corellia?”

“Know your place, Captain.” The General shook his head. “No matter what our gut says, we’re not privy to Darth Baras’s ultimate tactics.”

“Darth Baras undermines Darth Vowrawn for personal gain,” Jhonnen said, hoping Quinn took it to heart as much as the General. “Imperials are dying because the Dark Council is warring between itself.”

Greist studied him for a moment. “Captain…”

“Yes, General?”

Greist stood straighter. “Make ready the men. We’re moving out for Corellia.”

“Yes, sir!” The Captain scurried off to do it.

Greist looked back at Jhonnen and Quinn. “There, Sith. Happy now?”

“Relieved is a better word for it,” Jhonnen started to shrug and then froze. The bad feeling in his gut twisted sharply.

Vette.

“We need to return to the ship.” Jhonnen said, spinning on his heel to face Quinn. “They’re in danger.”

Jhonnen pushed the speeder as fast as it would go and ran to the shuttle, heedless of appearances and forcing Quinn to sprint to keep up.

He sensed the dark presence as they hit the space station and drew his lightsabers as he came out of the lift to the umbilical attaching The Sanguine Tide to Adamas Space Station.

Quinn drew his blaster. “My lord.”

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes at the figure by the airlock. The figure shaking Vette like a ragdoll by her throat.

“That was fast,” Draahg said, his voice unmistakable. “And here I thought I’d have more of a chance to amuse myself. Your slaves put up a decent fight too,” Draahg gestured to the blaster holes and lightsaber marks on his robes. “Darth Baras and I will put them to good use.”

Jhonnen saw red. He leapt for Draahg and Draahg blocked and pushed him back.

“Baras is the true Voice of the Emperor, you know. Soon he’ll claim his rightful title.”

“You know, I really thought I’d say this to my father first but, I am going to enjoy killing you.” Jhonnen said. “You and your master.”

“Baras held back when training you, but he taught me everything. And Darth Vengean showed me
dark side secrets even Baras doesn’t know.”

“I’m happy for you,” Jhonnen lunged. “Honest!”

They battled back and forth, Draahg with one lightsaber and Jhonnen with two. Draahg missed a parry and Jhonnen’s lightsaber bit deep into his chest right between the lungs. Draahg rattled out a cry and slumped to his knees.

“Ah,” he mocked, the words rattley. “You think you’re doing well.” He pushed himself to standing. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but I have a secret. I can’t be killed.”

Jhonnen leapt upwards and kicked him in the head.

“Quinn!” he shouted. “Stabilize the others.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Draahg shot out a hand and caught Jhonnen around the throat. Jhonnen kicked him in the stomach to try and get free before severing Draahg’s hand.

Draahg screamed and Jhonnen stabbed him again as his feet hit the floor. “If you can’t die, I’ll have to get inventive.” He force shoved Draahg off the railing and severed his other hand when he tried to grip the rail.

Jhonnen turned to look at his crew. Quinn was stabilizing Jaesa. Jhonnen hooked his lightsabers on his belt and sprinted to Vette. He checked her pulse and exhaled with relief when he found it.

Then he looked at Pierce.

And made a decision.

Pierce was dangerous, not to him, not really, but he was dangerous to Jaesa. He knew too much already, one more slip up on either Jaesa or Jhonnen’s part, and Pierce would have the ammunition he needed to start making demands.

Walking away from Vette, Jhonnen ignited his lightsaber and pressed the tip through the left side of Pierce’s chest. Quick. Painless.

“My lord?” Quinn asked. “What are you doing?”

“He was attempting to blackmail me,” Jhonnen said, unable to say that he was removing a threat from Jaesa. “Now he’s not. Carry Jaesa to medbay, I’ll take Vette to my room to rest until you can see her.”

“My lord,” Quinn said with a small bow.

“And Quinn, don’t mention what happened with Pierce. As far as the girls need to know, Draahg killed him.”

“Oh course, my lord. My lips are sealed.”

Jhonnen lifted Vette off the floor and tucked her head against his shoulder. He could smell her burns. Carefully, he carried her onto the ship and laid her, boots and all, on his plush mattress, taking her pulse again. He leaned against the wall and dragged a hand over his face.

He’d committed a murder. He’s slaughtered an unconscious man who had no reason to think
Jhonnen would do anything but patch him up. He had betrayed the Empire by taking out one of the men needed to take the Bastion.

But Jaesa was safe.

And that was a trade Jhonnen was willing to make even if he never slept well again.

His eyes strayed back to the bed. Vette’s chest was barely rising and falling, but the rise and fall was there. He exhaled a shaky breath and tried not to think that if he’d been a little later or Draahg a little more vehement, Vette’s neck might have snapped.

What would become of him if she didn’t wake up?

Vette had reclaimed the only parts of him worth defending. She’d rejuvenated his sense of humor, his sense of goodness, even his sense of foul play. All the little things Vitreous had tried to stamp out.

He loved her.

It wasn’t so much a revelation as it was an admission. He knew, he’d known.

He loved her and she could never, ever know. He didn’t know how he loved her, if there was a box these feelings belonged in, but no variation of spending his life with her was unappealing. Lovers, best friends, platonic soul mates, roommates.

He left the room for medbay and watched Quinn wrap Jaesa’s cuts and burns. She was awake, sitting upright on the low table. “Did everyone survive, Master?”

“Everyone but Pierce,” Jhonnen said. “I was too late.”

Jaesa studied him for a moment and he silently asked her to just believe the lie. Please.

“That’s a shame,” Jaesa said, undoubtedly not believing him. She slid off the table. “Thank you, Captain. I think I’ll retire to my room.”

Quinn nodded at her and turned to Jhonnen. “I’ll fetch Vette—”

“Treat her in my room, she got knocked around pretty bad.” Jhonnen said. “I’ll check in with the Hand and fly us to our next destination.”

“My Lord.” Quinn left medbay and Jhonnen headed to the holoterminal and contacted the Hand.

“Wrath,” said Servant One as he and Servant Two flickered into place. “Servant Two sensed the presence of Baras’s apprentice. Draahg.”

“Hidden in life; announced in death.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said. “He was here.”

“It seems our enemy knows you live. We have lost the advantage of surprise.”

Jhonnen thought about Quinn, and wondered if they’d had the advantage of surprise to begin with. If Quinn was responsible in any way for the attack…

But then, they couldn’t have known Quinn wouldn’t have been left behind.
“We knew it was going to happen eventually.” Jhonnen said. “I’d say he figured it out after I offed his sister.”

But how had he known they were on Hoth?

Servant One nodded. “Darth Vowrawn is receiving his reinforcements on Corellia. This and the loss of Draahg will incense Baras. He will tighten his grip.”

“Good.” Jhonnen said irritably. “I want this over with soon.”

“Your disruption of Baras’s plans continues. There is crucial need for you on a planet called Voss.”

Jhonnen had never heard of the place and let it plainly show on his features.

“Our awareness of this planet and its people is relatively new,” explained Servant One. “Baras laid the seeds for his ascension on Voss many years ago. We will explain when you arrive.”

Jhonnen headed back into his room as the conversation ended and watched Quinn tend to Vette. She was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed as Quinn administered something for her throat.

“Thanks,” she croaked, rubbing her throat as he pulled away.

“She’ll be fine, My lord.”

“Voss,” Jhonnen said. “Coordinates should be in the navicomputer.”

Quinn left them and Vette gave Jhonnen a small smile. “I’m fine.”

“You had me worried,” he admitted. “I think I might have been scared.”

Vette’s eyes widened and then she shook her head and croaked, “don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“My Lord,” Quinn said, coming into the lounge to find Jhonnen losing his third game of dejarik to Jaesa. “If I might have a word.”

“Of course,” Jhonnen said. “We’ll pick this up later, then.”

“Mate in three moves,” Jaesa said.

Jhonnen shrugged. “We’ll start a new game later then.” He followed Quinn into the cockpit.

“What’s the matter?”

“My lord, I’ve been dealing with a situation that’s getting out of hand.” Quinn squared his shoulders. “Moff Broysc contacted the ship and was incense to find me at the helm. He’s been sending recorded messages that are progressively more nonsensical. He’s always been scattered and aggressive—but now he seems completely unhinged.”

“I’ll deal with him next time he calls,” Jhonnen promised. “We don’t have to put up with his abuses.”

“I would appreciate that, my lord. Tens of thousands of soldiers and some of our most critical campaigns are at the mercy of his commands.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Then he needs to be removed from power.”
“I find myself agreeing with you.” Quinn turned back to his chair.

Jhonnen frowned. “I wonder if it’s Baras’s doing.”

“What, my lord?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Moff Broysc has no reason to contact me unless someone told him you were here. And all it does is remind you of Druckenwell and your service to Baras. I wonder if he’s putting the old Moff up to it.”

Quinn was very quiet for a moment. “I’m not sure, my lord.”

Jhonnen shrugged, hoping the observation put Quinn a little more firmly in his camp. He couldn’t be sure of anything. “How close are we to Voss?”

“We’ll be docking with the Orbital shortly, my lord.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Good, good. While Vette and I go down to the surface I want you to have Jaesa resupply while you see about finding someone to tune up the engine. We need the ship in top condition and you’ve got a way with people. Specifically people you outrank.”

Quinn huffed a dry laugh but nodded his head. “Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen headed to the lounge and contacted the Hand as the Tide connected with the umbilical. “Welp,” he said as the Hand appeared. “I’m here.”

“Darkness that silences await,” said Servant Two.

“Right,” Jhonnen nodded like he understood, which he absolutely did not.

“Wrath,” said Servant One. “Voss is a strange world. Both the Empire and Republic vie for the planet’s support in the war. The voss are wary of outsiders, access to the planet is restricted. You need permission from a sanctioned official to shuttle down.”

Well shit.

“We’ve contacted Darth Serevin,” continued Servant One, “the emissary trying to woo the voss. He believes you’re coming to help.”

“Can I trust him with anything or is his just the name that gets me to the surface.”

“He knows nothing. Help him if you wish, we do not care. You may encounter voss who know something of your purpose. They are attuned to the Force, and their most gifted receive visions of the future.”

“Voss vision interpretation sometimes suffers,” added Servant Two.

“True,” said Servant One in agreement. “Years ago, when the Empire became aware of Voss, the Emperor sent the military to lay siege to the planet. The visionaries thwarted what they foresaw to be a simple attempt to conquer. But,” Servant One shook his head. “The Emperor’s purpose was to claim a voss visionary to house the Voice of the Emperor.”

Jhonnen bit the inside of his cheek. It was monstrous. He didn’t imagine the Emperor shared space with the soul that had inhabited the body first. He just snuffed them out and took their meat suit for his own purposes.
It was everything Jhonnen hated about the Sith.

Symbolic of everything that had been done to him. His father had tried to crush the boy that was to get the heir he wanted.

What Jhonnen said, in as controlled a voice as he could manage, was, “so the true voice is somewhere on Voss? Am I meant to rescue it? Him?”

“The true Voice went on a pilgrimage to discover the nature of a great dark side presence on Voss. He has not been heard from since.”

“The Voice is quieted,” Servant Two said, almost mournfully.

“You, Wrath, must retrace the Voice’s steps, discover what has befallen him, and free him.”

“And if he’s dead?” Jhonnen asked.

“The Voice cannot die. If the host body expires, the Emperor’s essence would be released and return to us.”

“We can never lose our Voice,” Servant Two assured Jhonnen.

Jhonnen nodded like this was reassuring instead of horrifying.

“The Voice sought a voss hermit named Madaga-Ru,” said Servant One. “To request and audience with Madaga-Ru, the Voice was to light signals scattered about the land outside the voss capital, Voss-Ka. This hermit was the last being to see the Voice. Find out what he knows.”

Vette entered from the hallway she’d been lurking on and smiled at him. “I’m ready to hit the surface.”

“Good,” Jhonnen said. He gestured to the airlock and followed her out.

“So tell me the truth,” Vette said seriously as they headed for the shuttle. Jhonnen’s heart rate spiked. If she asked about Pierce he’d have to lie. If she asked about his feelings he had to try to lie. “Why me and not Quinn or Jaesa?”

Jhonnen almost deflated with relief. “Oh, that’s easy. From what I read about the planet the Voss are better disposed to ‘colorful aliens’ then they are to humans or rattataki.”

“And here I thought it was because you didn’t want to let me out of your sight,” Vette teased.

He shook his head and laughed. “Much as I like having you around, and you almost dying did in fact scare the shit out of me, I know that the minute I treat you like a porcelain doll is probably the same minute I lose you.”

“Clever kid,” she reached over and mussed his hair.

Jhonnen dodged away and carded a hand through the red locks.

For a minute he was twelve again, Kira ruffling his hair as they returned safe from one of their adventures.

It didn’t hurt.

They reached the shuttle and Jhonnen presented his identification. It was scanned, the private
managing the line bowed.

“You and your slave can go right in.”

Jhonnen bristled and Vette’s hand settled on his wrist.

He exhaled. “She is not my slave.” The words came out rounded and full.

“Uh… sorry? My lord?” The private stammered, sensing he’d given offense. “It’s just we… the clearance.”

“What about the clearance?”

“It’s for you and either your apprentice, your captain or your slave.”

“They got it wrong then. She’s a free contractor.”

“Then she can’t board the flight.”

Jhonnen’s nostrils flared. He stepped into the private, who stood three full inches taller than him, and growled. “Did I hear the word can’t come out of your mouth, Private?”

“N-n-no sir.”

Jhonnen snorted and turned on his heel, marching to the shuttle. Vette, who still had a hand on his wrist, kept pace. Jhonnen threw himself into a seat.

“Jhonnen, are you alright?”

“Fine,” Jhonnen said. “It just… you don’t wear a collar, you don’t have any brands. But people see us together and they just assume that you’re property.”

And they assumed that the only way they’d be together was if Vette were literally forced.

“Your accent dropped,” Vette said, her lekku twitched with unease.

“What?”

“When you told him I wasn’t your slave, you had a hutt space accent.” Vette squeezed his wrist and then let her hand flow down into his, lacing her fingers between his. “You know, they’ll probably make trouble about this when we land.”

“Probably not, actually. That private should be pretty convinced that I’ll hunt him down and scrap him for parts if anything else interrupts us.”

Vette sighed and knocked her head affectionately into his. “You’re stupid, you know that?”

Jhonnen nodded. “It’s one of my more consistent character traits.”

“Thank you.”

She left her head against his and her hand in his for a long moment and then the shuttle touched down and it was time to go to work.

Voss-Ka was probably the most beautiful city Jhonnen had seen. White buildings covered in elegant carvings popped out of an orange-gold landscape. The air was crisp and fresh, just the
littlest bit cold and the sky looked like it was on fire.

He’d never been anywhere like it.

Jhonnen and Vette took a shuttle outside of the city near where they were supposed to light the signal fires for Magada-Ru.

Jhonnen found and lit the signal pyres. When he lit the third he felt a presence through the Force. He moved closer to Vette and spun when someone spoke. A voss, glowing gold and almost completely transparent stared at him.

“Voss welcomes you, outsider. Why do you seek Madaga-Ru?”

Jhonnen’s right hand found the inside of Vette’s left wrist, poised to jerk her out of harm’s way if this went south. “I have questions for him.”

“A worthy goal. Madaga-Ru will meet you. The location is revealed.”

The golden spectre vanished and Jhonnen’s eyes widened as the image of a path and destination were fed into them. Like someone was sending coordinates to his brain instead of his datapad. He shook his head like an akk dog dispelling water when the vision ended and shrugged at Vette. “I know where we’re going.”

“How do you know where we’re going?”

“Force banthashit,” Jhonnen said with another little shrug. He withdrew his hand from her wrist now that she was safe and cleared his throat. “Come on.”

It wasn’t far to the cave Madaga-Ru had shown Jhonnen. The cave was full of beasts but with judicious application of lightsaber and blaster, they cleared through to the small campside at the back.


“I’m looking for him, actually.” Jhonnen gave his best smile. “I don’t suppose you can help?”

“There is much I could tell you,” said Madaga-Ru. “On Voss, everything gained is paid for. You must share a secret. Any secret will do.”

Shame darkened Jhonnen’s cheeks.

“Hey,” Vette said, reaching over to touch his shoulder. “I won’t judge.”

And that made up Jhonnen’s mind as to which of the two secrets he was carrying he would share.

“I killed an ally in cold blood while he lay helpless.” Jhonnen looked at the floor.

She could never know how he felt about her. Better she knew this.

“Pierce?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen nodded. “I’ll… I’ll explain later if you want.”

Vette nodded and gave his shoulder a squeeze before withdrawing her hand.
Jhonnen looked back at Madaga-Ru.

“An admission is made,” said the voss. “The act is payment. The one you seek forced me to help him unlock the secrets of Voss. I could not defy him. He went to the Dark Heart Chamber in the Nightmare Lands. You must follow.”

*Dark Heart Chamber* and *Nightmare Lands* sounded decidedly unpleasant. Jhonnen frowned. “Why did he go to the Nightmare Lands?”

“He did not answer my questions. The Dark Heart is a forbidden place. Where secrets are buried. Your predecessor wrapped himself in the Blessing of Oneness—without it, and outsider cannot even see the gateway to the Dark Heart. Vana-Xo can bestow the Blessing, in the Shrine of Healing. To find her, seek Fadith-Ki and complete the voss trials.”

That was a lot. “I’d better get started,” said Jhonnen.

“Get the Blessing at the Shrine of Healing,” instructed Madaga-Ru. “I will guide you when I can. Respect the voss way. Or the Dark Heart is denied.”

Fadith-Ki instructed Jhonnen and Vette to take down some gormak (the other, rival species on the planet) cannons in order to earn the respect needed to enter the Shrine of Healing. Once within the Shrine, Jhonnen located Vana-Xo. Her limbs shook with weariness and pain lined her face when Jhonnen and Vette found her.

Vana-Xo’s expression screwed up with pain as she pulled an orb of light from her chest and passed it into one of the injured voss. His wounds stitched closed as Vana-Xo panted with exertion.

“Vana-Xo?” Jhonnen asked, just to be certain he’d found the right woman. “I’ve come about the Blessing of Oneness.”

Vana-Xo shuddered with a sob and didn’t look up.

“Uh… should I come back later? I would just I’m on a bit of a time crunch.” Jhonnen rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“My pain stabilizes these ailing. I heard your purpose, but you are not voss. The Blessing bestows privileges. I hesitate—” she fixed her blue eyes on Jhonnen. “You cause my insides to scream.”

“Is it good, excited screaming or the bad kind?” Jhonnen asked.

Vana-Xo smiled a little. “Such humor eases my suspicions. Apologies.”

“No need,” Jhonnen said with a small smile. “You’ve got good instincts about Sith.”

“The voss are leery of strangers,” said Vana-Xo. She shook her head. “But to be granted the Blessing of Oneness, a sacrifice must be made. To heal, I siphon strength from the the able. Will you submit?”

Jhonnen looked at the injured voss and nodded. “Absolutely.”

He knelt in front of her and Vana-Xo gave him a thin smile. “Remain still.” She reached for him and Jhonnen felt the warmth start to leave his limbs, siphoned out though his chest. The pain was intense, like hot glass scraping between his skin and muscle, leaving the skin loose. It felt like he was withering.
But then it stopped, leaving only pain behind.

Vana-Xo turned, glowing white with all she’d taken from Jhonnen, and she dispersed the strength to the ailing. Jhonnen couldn’t watch, too busy staring at the floor trying to get his breath back. Vette’s fingers sank into his hair to massage his scalp briefly and he forced himself up to his feet.

“Your sacrifice has healed the ailing,” Vana-Xo said. “The Blessing of Oneness is earned.”

Jhonnen nodded. “I’m ready.”

Vana-Xo brought her hands up and extended them like she was going to push Jhonnen back. Instead it felt like she was pushing something into him. Jhonnen swallowed hard and tried to relax as the Blessing was bestowed.

“Oneness bestowed,” said Vana-Xo.

“Thank you,” Jhonnen gave her a thin smile. “Take care.”

He and Vette had almost left the Shrine of Healing when Madaga-Ru, gold and half-translucent, appeared in front of them. “You have the Blessing,” he said. “It will allow you to see the gateway to the Dark Heart. In order to unlock the gate, you must acquire the Pendant of Bone.”

“Okay,” Jhonnen said. “Where is it?”

“Commando Biddeck-Va owns it. He is encamped in the gormak lands, warring with the gormak chiefs. Convince him to give the bone.” Madaga-Ru vanished.

Jhonnen frowned. “It’ll be dark by the time we get there,” he said. “I think we’d better find crash space for tonight. We can take the shuttle from the Pilgrim’s Camp back to Voss-Ka for dinner and sleep.

Vette nodded.

The sun was sinking as they headed back to the Pilgrim’s Camp and the shuttle therein. Jhonnen moved more slowly than usual, feeling drained and tired.

They rented a room with two beds in Voss-Ka’s Imperial district. Jhonnen had food brought in, rather than taking Vette to a restaurant and they sat together to eat.

“So, Tivva landed on her feet,” Vette said, striking up conversation over the sauced rice dish they were eating. “She’s started seeing a Moff in the Outer Rim.”

“Huh,” Jhonnen said helpfully. “How’s that working out?”

“He’s apparently like sixty years old, though. I don’t know what to think.”

Jhonnen shrugged and thought about the girls at the club from when he was young. “If he’s good to her and she knows what she’s doing, more power to them I guess.”

“That’s practical of you.”

Jhonnen shrugged.

“Anyway,” said Vette. “Moff Old Guy apparently has all sorts of contacts in Imperial Intelligence and I guess he’s helping her find mother.”
“That’s great,” Jhonnen said. “I wish I could be more help but I don’t really have contacts.”

“You do your part,” Vette assured him. She poked her dish with her spoon. “I have dreams about the night they took me from her. Came in the night, pulled me off my sleeping mat. Just screamed and screamed.”

“Vette, I…” he stopped. There had to be someway to let her know that she was safe now. That no one was ever going to get away with hurting her ever again. “I know after Draahg it looks like I’m pretty incompetent when it comes to protecting my people, but I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.” He cleared his throat. “Quinn and Jaesa too, obviously but you’re… you’re my friend.”

Vette smiled at him. “I’m glad we’re friends, Jhonnen. And thanks. It means the galaxy to me.”

That night, Jhonnen’s thoughts touched on his mother. He tried to think of a moment other than the day he was ripped from her. He tried to remember her laughter. The thin hand on his head smoothing down to his cheek while she grinned at him. Inevitably, however, he thought about the last time he saw her. The way she’d struggled to her feet to argued with Vitreous about Jhonnen.

“He’s our son,” she’d said, almost calling Vitreous by his birth name.

Our son. Like that would make Vitreous see him as more than a tool.

Jhonnen thought about feeling her death. He could still feel it. Sitting like a conspicuous numb spot when he turned his meditations inward.

He was the Emperor’s Wrath. Once Baras was dealt with, Jhonnen could return to his actual goal. He could and would pay Vitreous back for what had been done to him.

Jhonnen rolled to his side and clutched the pillow to him.

He just had to finish with this banthashit with Baras.

Biddeck-Va wasn’t there when Jhonnen and Vette visited his camp so now, after a disheartening conversation with an underling about when he’d be back, Jhonnen and Vette were wiping out the gormak chieftains so Biddeck-Va would talk to them about handing over his Pendant. Despite their attempts to speed things along (Vette firing from the back of the speeder) defeating the gormak chieftains took most of the day. The chieftains were well defended and spread out, but at least Jhonnen’s strength had largely returned.

Jhonnen and Vette returned to Biddek-Va’s camp in the evening. Biddeck-Va was there, at least, and Jhonnen’s shoulders relaxed a little bit with the hope that this would all be over with tomorrow.


“I need it to get into the Nightmare Lands,” Jhonnen said, figuring he had nothing to lose by being honest.

“You’re mad,” Biddeck-Va said. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then folded his hands behind his back and began to pace. “The Bone gives me no advantage. To profit from it is good. I will award it, for a price.”

Jhonnen groaned.

“You killed enemy chieftains, but the gormak warmaster lives. Defeat him. The talisman will be
yours.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Fine, but we’ll need to be able to rest here after the warmaster is defeated. It’ll probably be late.”

Biddeck-Va nodded his agreement.

Jhonnen turned to Vette. “You ready?”

“Fighting through the gormak while it’s getting dark? Sure, what could possibly go wrong?”

He gave her an apologetic smile. She wasn’t wrong.

The dwindling light didn’t just hide their opponents. Jhonnen and Vette were able to sneak through most of the gormak guard to reach the back building where the warmaster was waiting.

The gormak warmaster was behind a force field but Vette, who was good at traps, figured out where the generators were and so Jhonnen faced the warmaster in short order.

To Jhonnen’s horror, the warmaster charged Vette first. Jhonnen moved to help but had to deflect blasterfire from the pair of warmaster guards. He bounced the bolts back at their owners, moving as fast as he could to dispatch them in time to help Vette. When the second of the two guards was down, he turned back to see Vette standing over the warmaster’s body, her expression grim.

“Are you alright?” Jhonnen asked, hurrying over to her.

“Fine,” Vette said. “Just out of breath.”

He smiled at her, relieved. “Let’s get back to Biddeck-Va. I could use a nap.”

They crept out the way they’d crept in and returned to the cave Biddeck-Va and his company were camped in. The fire had burned down but Biddeck-Va himself was still awake.

“The gormak warmaster is dead,” Jhonnen said, wondering if he should have brought proof. “Now about that pendant.”

“The Three will know of your assistance,” said Biddeck-Va. “My talisman is yours.” He pulled the chain over his head and set the small birdlike skull in Jhonnen’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks.” Jhonnen said, tucking the pendant safely into one of his many pockets. “Is there a place we can sleep?”

“We have only one extra bedroll. You will have to share it or take turns.”

Jhonnen looked at Vette. “You can go first.”

“Let’s just share it,” Vette said in reply. “That way we can get an earlier start without one of us yawning the whole day.”

Jhonnen’s heart beat just a little quicker, but he nodded.

They settled on the thin sleeping mat, Jhonnen using the small pillow and Vette using Jhonnen. He didn’t sleep, but meditated for several long hours. At first he meditated on his hate, the way he usually did. He let the hate strengthen him and reaffirm his purpose. But after a couple of hours, Vette curled her fingers more firmly in his shirt and distracted him. He meditated on her, on the feeling of safety she provided. The outlet for his humor.
“You now possess the Blessing of Oneness and the Pendant of Bone,” said Madaga-Ru.

Jhonnen opened his eyes to look at the translucent gold figure standing above him and Vette.

“I have guided you. Now I request your help,” Madaga-Ru said. “I need to live in your skin. Seize control of you. You will be unchanged and not feel a thing.”

“You won’t hurt Vette.” Jhonnen said softly.

Madaga-Ru shook his head. “Your companion will be unaware as long as she keeps sleeping.”

“For how long?” Jhonnen asked, biting down on his fear.

“Only a few moments. I will pay you for your service.”

“All right,” Jhonnen nodded slightly. “I agree.”

Everything went black.

“It is done. Thank you.”

Jhonnen was abruptly aware of the cave again.

“My pleasure,” Jhonnen said, feeling strange. He was still mostly under a sleeping Vette so he hadn’t gone anywhere or done anything. Which begged the question of what *had* happened.

“When your journey is at a close, you will see me again. And I will bear a gift,” Madaga-Ru said. “The Blessing shows the door to the Dark Heart chamber; the Pendant unlocks it. To access the Dark Heart, see Murbek Gehn in the Nightmare Lands. He is one of your kind.” Madaga-Ru vanished.

Jhonnen exhaled and closed his eyes again, returning to his meditations.

He woke later when his comm buzzed and shifted under Vette to pull it out of his pocket. Vette shifted, grumbling, as he turned it on.

“Quinn?”

“Apologies, my lord.” Quinn bowed his head. “Moff Broysc’s holotransmissions have increased and are disrupting operations. I have him on the holo now. He’s nearly incoherent, I can only assume some sort of dementia has sunk in.”

“You have him on the holo now?” Jhonnen asked.

“Yes, my lord. Which is why I’ve called you using my personal communication device. He’s tying up ship transmissions.”

“You have my permission to hang up on the Moff,” Jhonnen said seriously.

Quinn looked relieved. “Thank you, my lord. It’s been almost three hours.”

“Three hours?” Jhonnen asked in disbelief.

“I was unsure how to handle him, my lord,” Quinn admitted. “With Broysc in command, the Empire is in critical danger. I must implore high command to do something about him.”
Jhonnen nodded. He didn’t care about the Empire being in danger, not really, but he did care about helping Quinn take down someone who had tried to ruin his life. “I’ll attest that he’s nuts. Tying up my ship transmission for three damn hours.” Jhonnen shook his head. “I have your back on this, Quinn.”

“Thank you, my lord. I’ll return to my duties.”

“See you when we’re finished here.”

The Nightmare Lands felt like the Dark Temple but more spread out. Vette’s arms tightened around his waist as they took a borrowed speeder deep into the corruption. She pressed her face to the hollow between his shoulder blades and Jhonnen did what he could to extend his mental protections to her.

They parked outside of an ancient voss temple, similar in its construction to the Shrine of Healing but a fraction of the size. The terrible feel was strongest at the entrance. Fear, smothering and gripping, dripped down the back of Jhonnen’s throat and into his stomach.

“Did I ever tell you I have a fear of dying at the hands of a dark alien presence?” Vette said, reaching for flippancy.

“You did not,” Jhonnen said in response. “But it turns out I have a fear of you dying at the hands of a dark alien presence as well.”

“Jhonny,” Vette said, the nickname falling out of her mouth. “We have to stay together.” She extended her hand to him. “Whatever happens, don’t let go of my hand.”

Whether she was saying it for her sake or for his Jhonnen didn’t know and didn’t care. He gripped her hand tightly in his and ignited one of his lightsabers to defend them as the trespassed into the temple.

Jhonnen found the door at the back of the building.

“Why are we stopping here?” Vette asked.

“You can’t see the… right… Blessing of Oneness.” He produced the Pendant of Bone and pressed it into the skull-shaped socket.

A voice filled Jhonnen’s ears.


The door opened.

“Vette,” Jhonnen said in a careful voice. “Did you hear that?”

Vette shook her head. “I haven’t heard anything out of the ordinary.”

Jhonnen exhaled and squeezed her hand in his. “I don’t think you should come in with me.”

“What? Why? You can’t just leave me here.”

“There’s something in this chamber. Something *big* and dark and I… yeah. I don’t know if the Blessing or my Force sensitivity will protect me but I don’t want to lose you.”
“So your better plan is to leave me alone in this creepy-ass hallway just hoping that you can handle whatever’s beyond the invisible door?”

When she put it like that, it did sound really stupid. Jhonnen frowned at her. “I’ll be back soon.”

“You don’t know that,” Vette said. She sighed, lekku shifting unhappily. “Just… be careful.”

He touched her shoulder and gave a small squeeze before turning and entering the chamber.

Almost immediately he was attacked by insane, twisted nexu. They howled like they were in pain, lunging for him with their eyes trying to watch every direction at once and their mouths bloody from biting and tearing at one another. Jhonnen cut them down and proceeded into the main chamber.

_No closer._ Hissed the voice in Jhonnen’s head as he approached the door. _Desist. Death embodied. Death itself._

“Give it a rest,” Jhonnen snapped, his voice bouncing off the architecture. He swallowed his fear, pulling it into himself where he could draw strength from it. He had to hurry. He’d promised Vette she wouldn’t be alone for long.

On the far side of the large room was a voss mystic. The Voice.

“Wrath,” the mystic said in a deep, commanding voice. “Come to me. I am your Emperor.”

Jhonnen crossed the room and dropped to one knee respectfully. He tried not to reflect on the fact that before he was the Voice the mystic must have had opinions and family. Reasons to live.

The Voice indicated that he should stand. “Darth Baras plays the old games. He maneuvered me here, knowing this body could be bound to this place.”

“I intend to kill him, my lord.” Jhonnen said, more afraid of this man than he had ever been of anything else.

“My exit is paramount,” said the Voice. “Quickly.”

“How can I release you? My lord.”

“I am released only when this body dies. An oversight I will not repeat. But for now, the entity Sel-Makor makes suicide impossible. I will lower my defenses and use my Wrath to kill this body.”

“Alright,” said Jhonnen, igniting both of his lightsabers.

“I am ready. Strike me down.”

_No!_ Howled Sel-Makor. _Forever bound!_

The Voice was dragged across the room by an unseen force. Purple-black flames licked over his body.

_Sel-Makor takes this body! Such power!_

Jhonnen leapt at the Voice, striking with both lightsabers. His attack was deflected and he was flung backwards, knocking hard into the wall. Jhonnen ground his teeth together and darted back in, dodging the tendrils of Force energy that Sel-Makor used to try and sap his lifeforce. He battered at the Voice’s defenses, forcing Sel-Makor to fight defensively until he got one lucky
thrust through the Voice’s midsection.

The Voice dropped to his knees. “The entity is vanquished. The life in this body is ebbing. You have done well, my Wrath. Once I am released, the Hand will know all that has transpired. I cannot be trapped twice.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“They will continue to guide you in the effort to ruin Darth Baras’s bid.”

“Yes, My lord.” Jhonnen said uneasily.

“Voss holds no further interest for you. Return to your ship. This body is expiring.”

Jhonnen nodded and left the Voice to die. He turned out of the room into the hallway.

“Vette! We—”

Vette turned and fired, her eyes wide. More than the pain, it was the shock that froze Jhonnen in place. He touched one hand to the front of his shirt, over the blasterhole in his belly. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“Jhonnen!” Vette’s blasters clattered to the floor as she rushed over to him. She caught his shoulders and held him upright. “Shit. Fuck. Are you. Stars I can’t.”


Vette slid him down to sitting against the wall and dug through his pockets for a medpac. She stabbed a kolto shot just above the wound, tears forming in her eyes. When there was nothing more they could do, Vette helped Jhonnen to his feet and they left at a quick hobble, returning to the speeder and ultimately to Voss-Ka, Vette driving and Jhonnen forcing himself to remain conscious behind her.

They reached Voss-Ka and Jhonnen, his senses dulled with pain, felt something familiar. A warm presence. A safe presence.

He thought of Kira.

But Kira wouldn’t be anywhere near Voss-Ka. Kira would be on Nar Shaddaa. She would have forgotten him.

It was the pain talking. An instinctive need for something soothing.

He followed Vette onto the shuttle and settled down beside her. Vette kept one hand on his shoulder, like she was worried he’d slip away.

They reached the airlock in silence. Jhonnen’s attention snapped up as he felt Madaga-Ru through the Force. He turned to address the apparition. “Hey.”

“I come to pay for what I took. Knowledge and a warning. The Dark Heart is Sel-Makor’s prisons. I exist to prevent his escape. Through you, I know how to banish Sel-Makor forever.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,” Jhonnen said, wincing as his stomach moved.

“If Sel-Makor escapes, all existence is at risk. Voss demands payment. You helped. I grant you this secret-be warned, one of your own plots to betray you.”

“Voss bids you farewell.” Madaga-Ru vanished.

Vette looked at him. “So… are you going to kill Quinn?”

Jhonnen looked at the floor. “If he’s a threat to you or Jaesa, yeah. Yeah I am.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I like Quinn though. So I’ll wait until I’m sure it’s him and not like, the Hand or something.”

Vette rubbed his back a little. “Let’s get you to medbay first and worry about it later then.”

He nodded his agreement and hobbled alongside her into the ship. They split up once they were aboard. Jhonnen went to medbay and Vette went to find Quinn.

Vette let herself into his room that night as he was trying to sleep, his system full of medical stims and his bare stomach wrapped in gauze. He opened one eye when the door opened and closed it again at the lekku’d silhouette. She crawled up onto his bed and lay on top of the covers.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m alright,” Jhonnen assured her. “This is sorta what I get for leaving you in the nightmare hallway by yourself. I should’ve guessed that you’d be jumpy.” He tried to roll onto his side and hissed in pain, laying back down. “I’ll be fine in the morning, just need a couple of hours of dedicated healing meditation.”

“You sure?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been shot in the gut,” he said with a shrug. “When I was fifteen I missed a parry against some sparring droids. You can still see the scars. Well… maybe not anymore.”

“You used live ammo in sparring droids?”

“Vitreous thought it would motivate me. It worked.” He wanted to reach out with his thoughts, to curl them around Vette’s and make sure she understand that he was fine, that they were fine. But Vette wouldn’t understand and she had no way to reach back to him. His throat was dry, there weren’t any words he could think of to tell her how he grateful he was that she was on his side. That she was at his side.

“What happened with Pierce?” Vette asked. “Just… so I know.”

Jhonnen exhaled. “He almost discovered Jaesa. I don’t know what he would have done with the information, but I know it would have been bad.”

“I didn’t think you were capable of killing someone who was helpless.”

“Neither did I,” Jhonnen said softly. “Neither did I.”
In which Jhonnen cares a great deal about attempted murder unless he's the intended victim.

Vette was still asleep on top of the blankets when Jhonnen left his bedroom in just his sleep pants. He got himself a piece of fruit and headed for the cockpit to watch the stars. Quinn was already awake and already... frustrated. It was evident in the tension in his shoulders and the way he stared out at the abyss even though they weren’t going anywhere yet.

“What’s on your mind?” Jhonnen asked. He tried to look at Quinn and see the threat that was there, but he’d known the man for almost two years and what he saw was exasperation and loyalty. He just wished that loyalty was to him.

After two years he wanted to think that Quinn was at least a little bit fond of him, because he was very fond of Quinn.

Quinn looked up to acknowledge him, started to get out of his seat and turned his attention back to the stars when Jhonnen waved a hand to excuse him from social niceties. He was only wearing pants, after all, and covered in bandages. Hardly the look of a self-respecting Sith lord.

Quinn sighed. “I’ve gone as high up the chain as I can. No one will confront Moff Broysc. He’s too powerful and entrenched. He will serve until he’s killed or willingly steps down. And he will never willingly step down. It seems clear. I must deal with Broysc myself. Once and for all.”

A grim assessment really, but Quinn was probably right.

Jhonnen nodded. “You have my leave to do what needs to be done.”

Quinn stood up. “I will return shortly, my lord.” He saluted and then hurried to the small shuttle bay.

Jhonnen yawned and left the cockpit to make caf, starting in on the fruit he’d picked up.

When Jaesa awoke she found him on the sofa in the lounge reading. He set his datapad aside and smiled at her. “Quinn’s off for a bit, you can actually relax for a little while.”

Jaesa smiled for a moment and then it died. “In all honesty, Master, I’m plagued.”

“What’s happened?”

“It’s about Overseer Emmoridg. His work is so important—training Sith acolytes to secretly embrace the light. I sense that he won’t be able to hide much longer. If only we could help him find a secure way to continue his efforts.”

“Do you have any thoughts on that?” Jhonnen asked.

Jaesa shook her head. “But, as you have taught me, all that matters is that we try. I’ll dedicate
myself to doing just that. Perhaps a plan will present itself.”

“Perhaps it will.” Jhonnen nodded. “There’s caf by the way.”

He finished his drink and then contacted the Hand. “I’ve finished with Voss. The Voice is free,” he said to the figures of Servants One and Two.

“Yes,” said Servant One. “We are again aware of the Voice. Preparations are being made to secure a new host, but the rituals take time. You have done well, Wrath. The Emperor is pleased.”

“I live to serve,” Jhonnen lied.

The holoterminal switched off.

Jhonnen returned to reading, shifting a little when Jaesa settled on the couch beside him. Some downtime would be nice, until either Quinn returned or the Hand called with his next objective.

Reading, Jhonnen’s thoughts returned to the presence he’d felt in Voss-Ka. Now that he was healing up, he had to wonder if it had just been a leap of his imagination or if it had been real. If he had really felt Kira, what could it mean?

Had she finally saved up enough to get a ship? Was she a free trader or a smuggler? Was she happy? Why had she been on Voss? How had she gotten docking clearance?

His thoughts wandered in and around these lines until Vette woke up, at which point they turned to his friend.

“Quinn’s out,” he told her. “You can relax a bit.”

“What’s Quinn out doing?” Vette asked suspiciously.

“Dealing with Moff Broysc,” Jhonnen told her. “And about time too.”

Quinn returned two days later with Moff Broysc in tow. The old Moff’s hands were electrocuffed behind him and he had a gag in his mouth that Jhonnen felt was deserved.

“My lord, I’ve returned,” said Quinn. “I found Moff Broysc on a pleasure barge. He was on R & R while countless battles are raging. Despicable. I abducted him and brought him here to you.”

Jhonnen was about to ask why when it dawned on him. As Wrath, Jhonnen’s actions were beyond reproach from anyone besides the Dark Council. And not even them once the Emperor’s favor was proven.

He could kill Broysc with impunity.

“Scab!” Brosyc shouted as he managed to work the gag out of his mouth. “Traitor! You, Sith, I commandeer your ship, your crew. I commander you! Mine Now.”

Jhonnen blinked at him and shrugged his shoulders. “Look to Quinn,” Jhonnen said, watching Vette and Jaesa enter the room from the corner of his eye. “The man you tried to destroy is running this show, Broysc, your fate is in his hands.”

“No. Never. Not possible,” said Broysc. “I shunned him. I exiled him. He was to waste away! You are my men now!” Broysc looked around, at Quinn, at Vette, at Jaesa. “I command you all! Kill! Kill yourselves! I have spoken.”
Quinn’s composure faltered and he shook with rage. “My lord, I’ve resisted all along, but this is personal. Permission to execute the Moff?”

“Granted,” Jhonnen said, accepting that Quinn probably just couldn’t do it without permission.

“You cannot kill me!” shouted Broysc. “You are nothing! I am a Moff.”

“Not anymore,” barked Quinn. He threw a right hook that sent the Moff to the floor and then shot him in the head. The kill was quick and clean but it left Quinn panting. He holstered his blaster and picked the body up to dispose of it, leaving the quiet room for the actual silence of the airlock.

“Wow,” Vette said, “Quinn has emotions.”

Jhonnen nodded, privately jealous that Quinn had been able to deal with his nemesis so cleanly. It was a good kind of jealousy though, one interrupted with happiness for his… for Quinn.

Quinn returned ten minutes later with his composure back intact. He ignored Vette and Jaesa and addressed Jhonnen. “The body has been disposed of, my lord. No more of Moff Broysc’s men will have to endure his whims and incompetence. Thank you for seeing this through.”

“It was a pleasure,” Jhonnen said.

Quinn actually smiled a little at that. “The Empire is better off now.”

“Yep,” Jhonnen said, like that’d had any bearing on his decision.

“I will return to my duties.”

“If you’d like,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “You could also take some time to revel in your victory.”

Quinn considered this. He reached up with one hand and undid the top button of his jacket. Then he turned and headed for the galley. He returned with a cup of caf and settled on the sofa to drink it.

Vette chuckled.

Jhonnen rolled his eyes at her, privately pleased that Quinn was making the effort.

The Hand called soon after they had dealt with Moff Broysc.

“Time never pauses,” said Servant Two as the pair of servants flickered into view.

“Events are progressing faster,” said Servant one. “With the help of Armageddon Battalion, Darth Vowrawn has gained a foothold in the battle for Corellia. Everything now hinges on Vowrawn’s survival. Baras needs him dead to be named the Voice of the Emperor.”

“Then I’ll protect him,” Jhonnen said simply. “To Corellia?”

“The Wrath anticipates the Hand,” said Servant Two.

“Baras has marked Darth Vowrawn for death. Assassins have been sent. Their missions must end in failure. We will learn more and brief you when you arrive on Corellia.” The Hand flickered out.

“My lord,” said Quinn, coming around the corner to exit the cockpit. “I’m afraid we cannot go to Corellia at this time.” He held Jhonnen’s gaze evenly, but there was tension back in his posture. As
though the Broysc-killing had never happened.

“Oh?” Jhonnen asked.

“The Empire has enacted a martial law blockade of the entire system.”

“How do you propose we get around it?” Jhonnen asked, playing his part in Quinn’s deception.

“The Imperial fleet has been equipped with special transponder signal emitters. Any ship without this emitter sticks out like a sore thumb.”

“No idea,” said Vette, leaning against the far wall.

Quinn bristled. “I’ve been monitoring Baras’s communications,” he said sternly. “He only implemented the order recently. Probably to keep us away from Corellia. Without a signal emitter with Corellia space clearance, we will be noticed the minute we enter the system. But, I believe I have a solution.”

“Nick one?” Jhonnen asked.

“Yes, my lord.” Quinn nodded. “I intercepted a transmission granting Corellia clearance to a class-A starship not far from here. We can board the vessel and take their signal emitter.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Alright, Quinn.”

“I know the schematics of class-A starships by heart.”

“Of course you do,” said Vette, trying to be teasing and coming off tightly annoyed.

Quinn ignored her. “I could accompany you on board and lead you directly to the transponder station.” His shoulders squared. “Just a suggestion, but it would help expedite things.”

“Take us to the ship, Captain. You and I will board, get the emitter, and get out.”

“Yes, my lord.” Quinn saluted and headed back to the cockpit.

Vette glowered at Jhonnen until he walked over to see what was wrong, suspecting he knew what she was mad about.

“Did you hit your head?” she asked. “Why are you going along with this?”

“I want to believe he’s on my side,” Jhonnen said in a low voice.

“He’s not.” Vette hissed angrily. “We both know he’s not. Madaga-Ru knew he wasn’t on your side.”

“He might change his mind,” Jhonnen argued weakly. “Or it might be the Hand that’s plotting to betray me.”

Vette glared at him.

“Look, we’ve known him for years. He deserves the chance to back out of this.”

“What am I going to do if you die?” Vette asked angrily. “What about Jaesa?”

“If Quinn makes it back without me tase him, stick him in the shuttle, and leave his ass behind,”
Jhonnen suggested. “

Vette didn’t look mollified, but she did roll her eyes, lekku flashing her worry. 

Jhonnen set his hand on her shoulder. “It’ll be fine.” 

Vette shook her head and sighed but stepped in him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Dumbass.”

“That’s fair,” he said, hands moving to wrap around her waist. “Just… have a little faith in me.”

Jhonnen and Quinn left the ship together. Jhonnen followed Quinn as he lead them through the ship to where the “transponder” was waiting. Jhonnen, walking behind Quinn, caught himself mournfully memorizing the T of Quinn’s shoulders. He bit his tongue to keep from telling Quinn that he knew what was happening.

His… they weren’t properly friends but they were something. Coworkers at the fucking least. Roommates. His roommate was leading him into a trap at the behest of a man Quinn shouldn’t have owed anything to.

And they’d talked about that. From Jhonnen pointing out that the promotions had come quickly just as soon as Baras had let them. The fact that the only reason Broyse had had to message Jhonnen’s ship was the fact that Quinn was there. A reminder of the “debt” Quinn owed.

They reached a circular room, the only exit from which was behind him, and Jhonnen fixed Quinn with a look that was trying to be annoyed and only succeeding in being disappointed.

“My lord,” said Quinn, stepping so he was several feet in front of Jhonnen and then turning to face him. “I regret that our paths must diverge. Out of respect I wanted to be here to witness your fate.”

“Don’t do this,” Jhonnen said sadly.

Quinn looked away. “It pains me, but this entire scenario is a ruse. There’s no martial law and no special signal emitter. Baras is my true master.” He looked back at Jhonnen. “He had me lure you here to have you killed.”

“I’m shocked,” Jhonnen shot for flippant but still just sounded sort of sad.

“You’ve helped me immensely. I act today with a heavy heart. But without Baras I’d have no career.”

“A career he stifled,” Jhonnen argued.

“I didn’t want to choose between the two of you. But he’s forced my hand, and I must side with him.”

“Vette and Jaesa,” Jhonnen said flatly. “What happens to them?”

Quinn cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. “Once you’re gone, your crew will either join Baras with me, or be…” Quinn petered off. He shook his head. “Enough lies. Once you’re gone, Vette and Jaesa will take the shuttle. I will tell Baras they overpowered me.”

Jhonnen let his shoulders drop. “Thank you.”

“... yes, my lord.” Quinn said. “After all this time observing you in battle, I have exhaustively
noted your strengths and weaknesses. These war droids have been programmed specifically to combat you. I calculate a near zero percent chance of their failure.”

“I’m in trouble then, you’re damned good at what you do.” He Force slammed Quinn and the droids back into the wall and ignited his lightsabers. Darting in he deflected blaster fire from all three sources and slid around one droid to use it as cover from Quinn and the second droid. The droids had a cortosis covering that made slicing through them impossible. Jhonnen unignited one of his lightsabers and dropped it, using his now free hand to grab onto the droid while he stabbed between the plates and rode it to the ground.

Blaster fire peppered him, leaving burn marks on his arms and legs. He kicked Quinn in the face and grabbed onto the second war droid, scaling it as he had the first to drive his lightsaber into the inner workings.

Landing. He resummoned his second lightsaber and stalked over to where Quinn was on the ground.

“What went wrong?” Quinn asked. “I calculated precisely. You should be dead.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “That was tough, I’ll give you that much. But I think we both know what you were actually trying to achieve here.”

Quinn looked away, his weakness apparent.

“You didn’t want to kill me, you just didn’t want to make the decision against Baras. Like you didn’t want the make the decision to kill Broyse. This was suicide.”

Quinn nodded once, closing his eyes. “I have betrayed you. Conspired with your most hated enemy. I don’t expect your mercy.”

“Were you responsible for Draahg’s attack on the ship?” Jhonnen asked, folding his arms over his chest. If he was responsible then… he had to die.

But if he wasn’t…

“No my lord, I received my instructions once Draahg had failed.”

“Then all is forgiven.” Jhonnen shrugged his shoulders. “Baras is powerful and persuasive. Plus, you spent ten years thinking you owed everything you are to him. It’s fine, it happens.”

Vette was going to kill him.

Quinn stared up at him. “My lord… You killed Draahg… You killed Pierce you—”

“Do you want me to kill you?”

“Well… no, my lord. But it is inconsistent.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Pierce was a pain in the ass even before he started… yeah. Draahg tried to kill everyone. You… you just tried to kill me.”

“And that’s somehow acceptable?”

“Yes?”

“My lord.”
“Quit arguing. Do you want to die or not.”

Quinn gave a slightly defeated sigh. “If you will permit me to stay in your charge, my dedication to you will never come into question again.”

“Of course,” Jhonnen said. “I like you, Quinn. You’re exacting and tenacious but also loyal to a fault, as evidenced.”

Quinn sighed and stood up. He dusted his hands on his pants. “This interruption has delayed you enough. I’m eager to return to the ship and put this behind us.”

“Same,” Jhonnen said.

They headed back to the airlock and had almost reached it when Quinn stopped. “My lord, do you plan on telling the others what happened?”

“Vette knows I suspected you of treachery and if I lie to her she’ll see through it. I’m not going to tell anyone though. They need to have confidence in you.”

“I appreciate it, my lord.”

“Speaking of Vette though, let me board first. The plan was to tase you and leave you in the shuttle if you came back without me.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Vette was waiting on the lounge holding a stun gun. She set it aside when she saw Jhonnen. “Get the transponder?” she asked coolly.

“Yes,” Jhonnen lied. “I ended up on the wrong side of a security team,” he said before she could comment on the blaster burns on his arms and legs. “Quinn, go install the thing.”

Quinn headed for the cockpit and Vette got off the couch. She walked over and socked Jhonnen hard in the arm. “Don’t lie to me.”

Jhonnen rubbed the spot she’d struck. “It’s all fine, Vette. And we shouldn’t have any more trouble with it.”

She leaned her head against him. “That is the second time you have walked into something you knew was a trap without me.”

“Are you mad about my walking into traps or the fact that I won’t let you come with?” Jhonnen asked, curling his arm around her.

“Yes,” Vette said sternly. “Stop it.”

“I’ll try,” was the best he could offer because while he’d avoid walking into any more traps if he could, he wasn’t about to let Vette fall into them with him.”

Quinn was smart. He’d probably banked on Jhonnen taking Vette with him to get the transponder that didn’t exist. And if Vette had been there Jhonnen would have focused his efforts on protecting her.

He probably would have died in that case.

Jhonnen curled his other arm around Vette and held her tightly.
Vette was his weakness. He’d sacrifice himself to protect her. He’d sacrifice anything to protect her and that was easily exploitable.

Now you will come quietly, Jhonnen, or I will find the friend I sense and I will teach you two lessons about weakness in one day.

His limbs froze, horror-stricken. Vitreous would find her. Vitreous would kill her with a sneer. The way he’d killed Isixia. The way he’d killed the stray loth-cat Jhonnen had been feeding in secret. Vette would be silenced before she could scream and Jhonnen was leading her straight into it.

He let go of her and pushed her gently away. “I need to tell Quinn to set course for Corellia,” he muttered, staring at the floor.

“Jhonnen—”

“Later,” he said, hoping to have an answer when later came.

He headed into the cockpit and put a hand on the back of Quinn’s chair. “Take us to Corellia.”

“At once, my lord.”

Quinn needed time to process everything that had happened so Jhonnen went to find Jaesa instead. They spent many hours in meditation, Jaesa focusing on the light-sided Sith and Jhonnen trying to undo the mess of his emotions where Vette was concerned. While he loved her they were both at risk, and it didn’t much matter how he loved her. Vitreous wouldn’t care about whether the love was platonic, romantic, or familial. He would see his son caring for a twi’lek and become incensed. Vette wouldn’t be safe until Vitreous was dead.

And he couldn’t focus on Vitreous while Baras was trying to kill him and overtake the Empire.

The safest thing for Vette would be to send her away. She’d be happy hooking back up with Taunt and the guys.

Jhonnen unfolded from the floor of Jaesa’s room.

“Master?”

“I’ve gotta go talk to Vette,” he said in a dull voice. “But when I’m finished I need you to fly her somewhere and then fly the shuttle back.”

It didn’t matter if he would be alright without her. He’d navigated the Sith for seven years without her. Jaesa could and would watch his back. Quinn’s loyalties were secured (he hoped). What mattered was what was best for Vette.

“You’re planning on leaving her behind?” Jaesa asked.

Jhonnen nodded and left the room, heading across the ship to the engine room where Vette spent most of her time.

She looked up when he darkened the doorway. “What’s wrong?” she asked immediately.

Jhonnen felt his jaw lock up. He exhaled out his nose. “I want you to contact Taunt and the guys, then take the shuttle to join up with them. Jaesa will fly with you and fly the shuttle back.”

Vette frowned. “How am I supposed to get home?”
“You’ll… you’ll be home, Vette.” He tried to look her in the eye and couldn’t hold it. “That’s an order.”

“An order,” Vette challenged.

He nodded and turned moving rapidly down the hallway and back to his room. He closed the door, half expected Vette to batter it demanding an explanation. The thunder of fists on metal never came.

Jhonnen flopped backwards on his bed and felt the start of hot, stinging tears drip down into his ears.

He left the room in the middle of the night to get something to drink. In the dark he noticed a figure on the sofa in the lounge. Vette was curled up on her side, one lekku over her shoulder and her elbow underneath her head.

He tried to be angry that she’d disobeyed him, but it was hard to be angry when there was no surprise. Vette did what she wanted. Stubborn and headstrong and that was why he loved her. She was so much of what had been stolen from him. She had returned so much of who he had been to him.

He moved silently to the galley and got himself a glass of water. Then he tiptoed past the sleeping Vette to the engine room and grabbed her blanket. Carefully, as not to wake her, he lay the blanket over her.

She’d be happier with Taunt and the gang. She’d be safer.

Vette moved, curling a hand around the hem of the blanket and pulling it higher on her shoulder.

Jhonnen returned to his room and curled up in his bed, staring blankly at the wall.

He startled when the bedroom door slid open.

“Jhonnen?”

“You were sleeping,” he protested.

“I’ve always been a light sleeper,” she told him, stepping into the room. “Ever since they took me from my mother.”

The door closed, pitching them both into blackness as it cut out the low red ship lights.

“Do you really want me to leave?” Vette asked.

“You’d be safer.” Jhonnen rolled onto his back. “And you’d be happy with the old gang. Taunt would probably be happier having you along.”

“Are you sending Jaesa away?” Vette challenged gently. “Or is it just me?”

Jhonnen exhaled. “I tried to make Jaesa leave back on Quesh when Baras almost killed me and then again on Belsavis. But… no… I’m not asking Jaesa or Quinn to leave.”

“Why me then?”

“You didn’t do anything,” Jhonnen assured her. He sat up and stared into the blackness. “It’s…”
He couldn’t tell her. Not really. He couldn’t risk alienating her, making his feelings her problem. “I care about you, Vette,” he said awkwardly. “And if I’ve learned anything it’s that if I care about things too deeply, the universe will find a way to separate me from them.”

“The universe or your father?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen swallowed, squeezing his eyes closed. It was easier to talk about in the black. He didn’t have to see her expression. Didn’t have to know she was evaluating him, scanning for weakness. “What if I can’t protect you from him? He’ll find out about you eventually and if he suspects how much I like you, that you’re my best friend, he’ll kill you to teach me a lesson. Even if…” He shook his head. “I don’t want your death on my hands. I couldn’t handle it.”

He heard her footsteps and felt the bed move as Vette felt for it and then sat on the edge.

“We’re tougher than your father,” she said. “And we make a good team.” She reached out and her fingers touched his bare chest. Jhonnen inhaled sharply, feeling vulnerable and tense. Her whole hand settled on the ridges of his sternum. Probably she’d intended to touch his arm. “I’m not leaving.”

Jhonnen looked away, ashamed. He wasn’t just scared for her but he couldn’t admit that. He couldn’t say that Quinn’s plan to kill him had almost certainly involved her. He couldn’t admit that it would have worked.

He laid back down.

“Can I stay tonight?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen nodded and then remembered that she couldn’t see him any more than he could see her. “You don’t have to ask anymore. I’m pretty much always happy to have you.”

Vette slid under the blankets and shifted around probably to curl her arms around her pillow. “Someday some cute boy or girl is going to steal you away and I’ll be confined to the cot in the engine room.”

Jhonnen laughed a little and shook his head, rolling to his side to face her. “I like you more than I think I like cute boys or girls.”

“Flatterer.”
Jhonnen, Quinn, Jaesa and the incomparable Vette head to Corellia to break the last legs of Baras’s power structure.

Quinn met Jhonnen in the galley the next morning. He presented him with a cup of caf and an open expression, like he had good news but he was still gauging where they stood. “I’m fielding reports from across Imperial forces,” Quinn said. “Among the men there’s universal relief that Moff Broysc is no more.”

“The men directly beneath him should have done something, but I’m glad they’re all pleased,” Jhonnen said. “Thank you for the caf.” He took a sip, milk and sugared to perfection.

“My pleasure, my lord.” Quinn sipped his own drink, black. “I feel no conflict over my actions. Broysc was a blight on the Empire.”

“That’s fucking true,” Jhonnen agreed with a nod. It was true, but he also couldn’t quite get around the fact that Quinn had tried to kill him less than 30 hours beforehand.

“You are guiding me to a new paradigm, my lord. One a bit more… improvisational.” A smile tugged at Quinn’s mouth. “I believe it will only make me a better officer.”

“If it makes you relax once in a while I’ll call it a win,” Jhonnen said. He held up a hand to soothe Quinn’s ruffled feathers. “I’m mostly teasing. You’re a fine officer, probably one of the best. And you’re learning to navigate Sith banthashit so that’s a point in your favor already.”

“I hope to avoid being in the middle of further Sith infighting, though at least now I am certain of where my loyalties lie.”

“Can’t say I’m not glad to hear that.”

“I will not disappoint you, my lord.” Quinn stood a little straighter as he said it and the effect was that he towered over Jhonnen. “We should arrive at Corellia within the next two hours.”

“I should use the fresher then. Makes a good impression.” Jhonnen took another drink of his caf and shuffled off to do so.

When he emerged everyone else was awake. Jaesa was reading on the lounge sofa and Vette traded places with him so she could use the shower. Jhonnen contacted the hand through the holoterminal.

“I’ve almost reached Corellia,” Jhonnen said.

“The ledge is near,” said Servant Two.

“Wrath,” Servant One said. “You are there to protect Darth Vowrawn from Baras’s threats. Our efforts to locate his secret headquarters are ongoing.”
“Another digit of the Hand will tap the Wrath,” said Servant Two.

Jhonnen nodded because he actually thought he understood what that meant. He hoped, anyway.

“Meanwhile,” said Servant One. “We are tracking three assassins arriving on secret landing fields. It will be difficult to stop them all.”

“Then I’ll hurry once I’ve landed.” He noted Quinn coming out of the cockpit.

“Transmitting the coordinates for all three landing strips.”

“Received, my lord,” Quinn held up his datapad to indicate it.

“These killers are but the first,” Servant One continued. “There will be more. Vowrawn actively defies Baras. If he dies, Baras will be named Voice of the Emperor. Protect Darth Vowrawn at all costs, and aid in his attempts to undermine our enemy. Goodbye.”

“My lord,” Quinn said once the Hand had hung up. “I’m detecting a forced transmission…”

“Let it through,” Jhonnen said. “We might as well hear what Baras has to say.” Jhonnen turned his attention back to the holoterminal and folded his arms across his chest as Baras came into view, looking much the same as always.

“I assume you still recognize me,” Baras said icily. “Consider yourself fortunate that I am reaching out like this.”

“I’m sorry,” Jhonnen said sarcastically. “Have we met?”

“You wit has not improved,” Baras said dryly. “It must be ignorance driving your actions. As wronged by me as you may feel, surely you are not intentionally defying the Emperor. I’m here to tell you that you are being deceived. The organization you work for is not the Emperor’s Hand.”

It was on the tip on Jhonnen’s tongue to say that he didn’t care and that any Emperor who would have chosen Baras was an Emperor worth defying, but then it occurred to him that Baras was almost certainly recording the call and any anti-Emperor sentiment would be used against him later.

He shrugged instead. “You’ve lied about everything else, Baras, you’ll forgive me for not believing you about this.”

“I don’t blame you for doubting me. And I will not apologize for my actions. I am the Voice of the Emperor. And there is a reason for all we do. In the end, what you think does not matter.”

There was no we where the Emperor was concerned. There was an I. The Emperor completely subsumed his host.

“So believe what you will,” Baras continued. “But your handlers have you in over your head, sticking your wet nose in Darth business.”

“You must be real nervous if you contacted me to stop me yourself,” Jhonnen observed. “Scared is a good look on you. Very flattering.”

“Your lack of sight is almost laughable,” Baras snorted. “Walk away now, and perhaps our previous animosities can be swept aside.”

The call ended and Vette snorted loudly from the hallway nearest the fresher. “He’s the one who
needs to seek forgiveness.”

Jhonnen gave her a smile. “He’d have a hard time finding what isn’t there.”

Vette smiled back at him. “Good.”

“When we land, Vette, I want you to come with me to stop the assassins. Quinn, Jaesa, I don’t trust Baras not to send saboteurs after the ship.”

“We’ll remain vigilant, my lord.” Quinn promised.

“Jaesa should be able to feel danger a ways off, which will give you warning. The plan is to find Vowrawn and protect him for Baras’s agents.” He looked at Quinn. “Take us in.”

The first two assassins were easily stopped. Jhonnen even managed to talk the first one into leaving. The third assassin, however, was ahead of him. Jhonnen fished his comm out of his pocket as it buzzed.

“Wrath,” said a hooded pureblood woman. “I mark your position. The third of the three secret landing strips. Your third target arrived earlier than expected. I am Servant Eleven of the Hand. You were told to expect my call.”

Servant Eleven, huh, Jhonnen was forced to wonder how many Servants there were. How many “fingers” did this guy have?

“Do you know where the third assassin’s gone?” he asked.

“I tracked his landing,” she said. “I lost visual surveillance. But my primary purpose is a success. I have located Darth Vowrawn’s secret headquarters. Uploading coordinates. He is operation within hostile territory. A massive tower in the heart on Incorporation Island. All Republic controlled. Amazing.”

“That’s impressive,” Jhonnen agreed, wondering how Darth Vowrawn had disguised himself to pull that off.

“Yes,” agreed Servant Eleven. “He orchestrates the war against the Republic right under their very noses. His operations must be disguised as Republic. But if I found him, Baras’s missing assassin could too.” She paused and reached up to touch her ear. “Hold. Yes. I will convey it. Eleven out.” Her hand lowered. “Servant Two has spoken to me. He says to be ready for suspicion.”

That certainly sounded like Servant Two. “I will be,” Jhonnen answered.

“You are the Emperor’s Wrath. My mission is complete. I am recalled. The Hand hopes you find Vowrawn before the assassin strikes.” Servant Eleven bowed and disconnected and Jhonnen tucked his comm away after checking the coordinates.

“Great, so it’s the entire Hand that’s creepy,” Vette said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Seems that way,” Jhonnen said. He lead her off the roof and back to the speeder, taking off at top speed towards the secretly occupied tower where Vowrawn was apparently hiding and puppeteering the war.

The problem with Vowrawn operating directly under the enemy’s nose was that Jhonnen couldn’t just walk in. He had to carve his way through Republic troops to disengage the shield that
protected the tower. At least Vowrawn hadn’t chosen to hide behind a bunch of Jedi. Jhonnen picked his battles as carefully as possible, jumping the perimeter patrols and working his way through to each of the shield generators by striking small groups of soldiers as quickly as he could.

Eventually he entered the tower and came face to face with the Imperials who were pretending to be Republic soldiers. He knew they were pretending because no one shot at him as he turned the corner.

“Sith, are you lost?” the Captain said in a not-very-good Republic accent. “You’re in a Republic-aligned corporate headquarters.”

“Ease up,” Jhonnen said, “we’re on the same side.”

“I-uh-don’t know what you’re talking about,” the Captain said uneasily. “The consortium of corporations has cameras in every corporate lobby, so we are being observed by the Empire’s enemies as we speak. A Sith comes in here, he’s gonna meet resistance. So—uh—we’re going to have to kill you.”

“You couldn’t if you tried. Just take me to the man in charge,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest. “I’m here to help. Just pretend to arrest me and we can both move on with all of our limbs.”

“Good idea,” said the Captain under his breath. “You’re outnumbered, Sith! You and your accomplice. Put your hands up and don’t make another move.”

Jhonnen and Vette raised their arms.

“Glad you came to your senses. Now you’re going to our chief of security in the next room.”

Jhonnen and Vette were all but paraded into the next room where all the guns pointed away from them immediately. The Captain gave an Imperial salute. “Thanks for helping me avoid a messy situation, my lord. Lord Haresh is in charge.” He pointed down a sloping hallway. “He’s just down there.”

“Thank you,” Jhonnen said. He and Vette headed down the hallway to meet Haresh and explain that they were there to save Vowrawn from Baras.

Be ready for suspicion.

It was probably going to get rocky.

Lord Haresh was a zabrak with Imperial markings. He narrowed his eyes as Jhonnen and Vette came around the corner. “What? The alarms didn’t sound. How did you get in here?”

“I knocked,” Jhonnen said evenly. “I need to speak with Darth Vowrawn.”

“We know who and what you are,” Haresh said darkly. “So Baras’s most deadly apprentice has finally found us. My master has been on to you since the beginning.”

“Baras is no longer my master. Not after the whole ‘almost killing me’ thing,” Jhonnen said flatly.

“Yes, yes,” Haresh sounded almost bored. “We’ve all heard about Baras betraying you. No one’s buying it. Vowrawn can smell Baras’s ploys a thousand light years away. He knows the rift between you and your master is a ruse. Painstakingly orchestrated to get you close enough to strike. So, drop the act.”
Jhonnen growled. “I do not work for that ass-bag. I’m here under orders from the Emperor’s Hand.”

“So stubborn. We’ll see your tune change when you’re bleeding to death.”

“You don’t bleed from lightsaber cuts,” Jhonnen said tersely. He dodged backwards as Haresh lunged at him and ignited both of his lightsabers. He fought defensively, hoping to talk some sense into the other Sith until Haresh leapt backwards and brought up his free hand to choke Vette. Jhonnen lunged forward and severed the offending arm before neatly bisecting Haresh. He turned around. “You alright?”

“Fine,” Vette assured him.

Jhonnen stooped and went through Haresh’s pockets, finding his cred-chit, which he was keeping, and the security key to get deeper into the building. They headed up to the penthouse, figuring that was the most likely place they’d find Darth Vowrawn. Jhonnen kept his right lightsaber handy just in case there was a repeat of Haresh’s paranoia.

Which there probably would be.

How was he supposed to prove he wasn’t there as part of one of Baras’s schemes? The trouble was that, if it were a scheme, it was a pretty good one. And Sith saw schemes in everything because they thought about how they would orchestrate it.

He’d left the smuggler’s moon to find himself against the real high-risk swindlers.

The elevator door opened and Jhonnen and Vette found themselves face to face with three sith lords. They stepped out of the elevator.

“I need to speak to Vowrawn,” Jhonnen said, already prepping for the inevitable fight.

“You’ll never find him, scum,” said the Sith lord in front. “You defeated Lord Haresh, but you can’t overcome the three of us at once…”

“Stop,” said a voice from the shadows. Out walked an ancient pureblood sith, dark side corruption like eyeliner around his red eyes. “Lord Qet, stand down.”

“My lord, retreat into the shadows,” Lord Qet said. “We will stop this assassin.”

“There could be ten of you and you would still fail,” said the old Sith, frowning deeply.

“I’m here to protect you,” Jhonnen said, hoping that maybe the dark lord himself would listen.

“Please,” said Vowrawn, sounding tired. “Don’t insult my intelligence. I applaud you. Convey my congratulations to your master for his superior game play.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes hard enough to worry about spraining them.

Vowrawn looked him over. “At least I die at Sith Blood hands. I ask only that I not suffer the indignity of decapitation.”

Jhonnen groaned. “One, he’s not my master. Two, I am the Wrath of the Emperor here at the request of the Hand—” something moved in the shadows and cut him off.

Vowrawn didn’t appear to notice. He stroked the long tendrils that dripped down around his mouth. “Nothing more can be gained by maintaining this deception. He smiled cruelly. “Ah. If this
is true, the game is renew—"

Jhonnen wrapped the Force around Vowrawn’s waist and jerked him forward, darting past as a grenade was rolled into the congregation. Jhonnen struck the grenade with his toe and kicked it away a mere second before it exploded.

“Darth Vowrawn,” said an uncloaking weequay from the shadows. “Baras says you gotta die.”

Jhonnen threw his lightsaber and bisected the assassin. He walked over to the body and picked his weapon back up. “Annnd that’s three.” He went through the assassin’s pockets, stole his cred-chit and then clipped the lightsaber back to his belt. He turned his attention back to Vowrawn.

“That assassin had me dead to rights,” Vowrawn said, sweeping past the corpse of one of his apprentices without a second glance. “You did not hesitate to defend me. My friend, I am convinced. What’s more, I believe—with my help—you can defeat Darth Baras.”

“Music to my ears,” Jhonnen said, returning to Vette’s side.

“Then I have a little confession to make,” Vowrawn said, smiling the way a shark might smile. “It is true that I’m here to lead our important war effort—but there are other reasons I chose Corellia. Significant pillars of Baras’s power base are here. And together, we can tear them down.”

“Your safety is my first priority,” Jhonnen said. “Without you the Council will vote to recognize Baras as the Voice, which he isn’t. I met the true Voice.”

“Fascinating. And a story for another time,” Vowrawn said.

Jhonnen nodded. “I suggest you relocate to my ship where my crew can aid your apprentices in protecting you from the other assassins Baras is sure to send.”

“Far be it for me to defy you,” Vowrawn said good naturedly. “My protection here has taken a recent hit. But before I go, let me guide you.” Vowrawn brought up a map of Coronet City. “Most of the Dark Council knows Baras is not the Emperor’s true Voice, but Baras’s two top agents force them to support his bid. One agent safeguards secrets that he uses as leverage. The other leads Jedi Masters in campaigns against Sith who defy him. Now if they were to disappear…” Vowrawn spread his hands out in front of him as though he were gesturing to a great banquet.

“Baras can’t gridlock the council,” Jhonnen said with an understanding nod.

“Exactly. Baras’s first undercover agent is posing as Colonel Senks of the Corellian resistance.” The map moved to show Jhonnen where Senks was hiding. “His stronghold is a labyrinth of secret passages. Unless you scramble his security codes before laying siege, he’ll be able to flee through a dozen different escape tunnels.

“And the guy leading the Jedi?”

“My operative is uncovering the identity and location of his Jedi infiltrator. I expect results soon. For now, Senks.” Vowrawn walked across the room and returned with several small metal balls. He handed them to Jhonnen. “These pulse disruptors will kill all electronic code emissions—effectively locking Senk’s secret passages. In truth, he’s a fantastic resource—it will be a shame to lose an agent of his caliber.”

“I’ll see if he can be reasoned with,” Jhonnen said, tucking the pulse disruptors into a pocket.

“An excellent solution, if it can be done. My remaining apprentices and I will report to your ship
now. The minute I can point you to the second of Baras’s agents, I will. For now, Colonel Senks.”

Jhonnen and Vette took the elevator down with Vowrawn and his apprentices. They split up on the street, Vowrawn and his apprentices double timing it towards the spaceport while Jhonnen and Vette headed for the rocket tram.

They’d just gotten settled on the tram when Quinn called them. “My lord, I have Darth Vowrawn here for you.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen said.

Vowrawn flickered into view. “My friend, I was expecting more people.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Quinn and Jaesa are both highly competent, you’re in good hands.”

“I hope their talents are not required,” said Vowrawn. “If Senks doesn’t hand over the files he safeguards, once you’ve neutralized him, I advise destroying his database to eliminate it all. Once done, contact me. But leave the compound first. It’s Baras’s facility and sure to be bugged. Until then.”

Vowrawn flickered away and Quinn reappeared. “Any further instructions, my lord?”

“Take off. Remain in orbit until I call for you. Vowrawn must survive.”

“Yes, my lord. Good hunting.”

Jhonnen tucked his comm away and leaned against the wall as the rocket tram sped along. Vette leaned against him.

They remained like that in silence until the rocket tram pulled into the station in Labor Valley. They waded through the warzone, doing their best to avoid confrontations and finding confrontations anyway. The Republic soldiers fired whenever they saw Jhonnen and he’d be forced to stop and deal with them.

At length, they made it to the building were Vowrawn believe Senks was hiding. Once inside, Jhonnen handled the occupying rebels while Vette took the disruptors and locked down all of the escape routes. Then they found Senks where he was in with the computer databanks. Jhonnen flashed him a smile.

“I know that code is right!” said Senks, unaware of Jhonnen and Vette. “Why aren’t my escape passages opening?”

“Because breaking things is what we’re best at,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest. “Hiya.”

“Strong enough to demolish my forces and smart enough to take out my tech. When the alarms sounded, I knew there was trouble coming.” Senks held up both hands. “Don’t strike. I’m a secret Imperial agent working directly for Darth Baras.”

“That would be why I’m here, yes,” Jhonnen drew and ignited one of his lightsabers. “You keep Baras’s stock of secrets, and he uses that to manipulate others.”

“My work keeps rogue Imperial elements from destabilizing the Empire,” Senks said bravely. “But that’s just part of what I do. I’m essential in the fight for Corellia. I steer Republic-aligned resistance forces into battles they can’t win. Shut me down and we lose this war.”
“Look, I have to kill Baras’s pawns. If you’re one of his loyal drones, you have to go in the ground. So work with me here. Give up the secrets you’re harboring for Baras and I let you live.”

“There’s no future in denying Baras,” said Senks.

“As opposed to the bright future you see in denying me?” Jhonnen said, cocking his brow.

“It seems you hold all the cards,” Senks said nervously. “Every regime eventually falters. I’d be wise to get out before the towers start crumbling. I’ll upload the files,” he turned over to the computer console to do so. “There. Wiped from my system and relinquished to you. Does this earn your mercy?”

“Let me verify,” Jhonnen said. He transmitted the files to Darth Vowrawn.

Vowrawn appeared over holo. “Excellent. This is the leverage Darth Baras has over my fellow Dark Council members. Now they are free of him.”

“Does this mean I get to keep breathing and winning the war for Corellia?” asked Senks.

Vowrawn shrugged. “I leave that decision to my formidable friend. What do you say—does Senks live or die?”

“He lives,” Jhonnen said easily. “At least as long as I am assured he’s not working with Baras.”

“I will cut off all contact with Baras,” promised Senks. “I guarantee it.”

“Good work, my new friend,” said Vowrawn, sounding pleased as punch. “You are proving we can tear Baras down without compromising the Empire.”

Jhonnen didn’t care about the Empire, but at least the knowledge that his actions benefited the Empire would please Quinn. He liked it when Quinn was pleased.

“I have news,” Vowrawn said. “But as I said—Baras likely has that place bugged. Contact me when you clear the compound.”

Jhonnen and Vette headed outside and Jhonnen dialed the ship’s holofrequency.

Quinn answered. “All quiet here, my lord, transferring you to Darth Vowrawn now.”

“Captain Quinn is an excellent officer,” said Vowrawn. “I’m in good hands here. Baras’s false Jedi is still at large. He leads Jedi against Sith who defy Baras’s will. My operative, Shadow, is searching for him. Unfortunately, Shadow is pinned down by enemy artillery. He has our information but had to go radio silent to avoid capture.”

“So I’ll head to him,” Jhonnen said.

Vowrawn nodded. “Shadow was cut off on the other side of Axial Park, beyond Coronet Zoo. The park is a front-line battlefield, where the heaviest fighting is taking place. We have a safe house in that sector. Shadow will be waiting there.”

“Alright, send me the coordinates.”

“If you’re interested,” Vowrawn said slowly. “There is also an opportunity to help the war…”

“I’m listening,” Jhonnen said.
“The bombings that blocked Shadow are hampering our ground forces in Axial Park. If you could destroy the enemy artillery banks along the way, it would be most helpful.” Vowrawn shrugged. “Either way, Shadow will tell you all you need to confront Baras’s Jedi spy. We’ll talk again when the deed is done.”

Jhonnen pocketed his comm and headed back to the rocket tram.

The artillery was at least satisfying to explode.

Jhonnen’s comm buzzed and he produced it. Jaesa was on the other end, her expression pinched with worry. “My lord, we are under attack. Captain Quinn is doing what he can to fly us out of harm’s way, but our pursuers are aggressive and heavily armed.”

“Shit,” Jhonnen said. “Tell Quinn to land and see if you can lose your pursuers on the ground. You stand a better chance of that than of surviving a ship explosion.”

“Yes, Master.” Jaesa hung up.

Vette put a hand on Jhonnen’s arm. “The sooner we deal with Shadow and Baras’s other operative the sooner we can meet up with everyone.”

Jhonnen nodded. They had to focus on the task at hand. He had to have faith in Jaesa and Quinn.

Despite knowing what was at stake, Jhonnen couldn’t deny the fact that Vowrawn’s life wasn’t worth the lives of his crew. Maybe it would have been a fair trade in the eyes of the Empire, but Jhonnen wasn’t doing this for the Empire. He was trashing Baras so he could have a life without looking over his shoulder. Something he was doing for Vette, Jaesa and Quinn as much as for himself.

He and Vette ducked into an Imperial base and found Shadow near the back.

The small human male pulled his blaster and pointed it at Jhonnen. “Stop! Identify yourself or die.”

“I’m Lord Jhonnen, I’ve been sent by Darth Vowrawn.”

“What!” Shadow shouted. “Speak up, my ears are still ringing from artillery fire!”

Jhonnen twisted the blaster out of Shadow’s hand with the force and repeated himself. “Darth. Vowrawn. Sent. Me.”

“Yes,” said Shadow. “Yes, I see, of course. I’m sorry, my lord. The ringing in my ears has unnerved me. I have a lead on Darth Baras’s other spy. A team of Jedi have secretly landed on Corellia.” He cleared his throat. “I intercepted a transmission from one of them to Baras, conveying readiness to lead the other Jedi into a death trap.”

“Awesome. Where are they?”

Shadow nodded. “The Jedi are gearing up in a Republic staging bunker. Enemy special forces deploy there, so it’ll be a high-risk invasion.”

“What of this hasn’t been?” Jhonnen said with a little sigh.

Shadow seemed to miss it.
“Thank you for your help, Shadow,” Jhonnen said. “Just send me the coordinates.”

“Yes, my lord. When you’re done, you can contact me from outside the bunker and I’ll have Armageddon Battalion secure the area.”

Jhonnen nodded and turned on the ball of his foot to leave.

They didn’t have far to go. Vette stuck close to Jhonnen as he twisted the Force to cloak them for a few seconds, just long enough to get into the bunker itself and surprise the troops inside. Jhonnen darted for a Jedi and took him off guard so he couldn’t raise the alarm. He rushed ahead while Vette followed at a pace to keep from drawing the attention of any of the Jedi Jhonnen went up against.

They came to the board room the Jedi were using as meeting place and Jhonnen slowed his pace, entering the room calmly while Vette hung at the top of the stairs to provide covering fire when it was required.

“Your invasion ends here, Sith,” said one of the Jedi. “You are severely outnumbered.”

Jhonnen shrugged, outnumbered hadn’t really mattered in the past. “One of you is working for Darth Baras leading the others into conflicts they can’t survive. I don’t care about Jedi survival, which makes me more your friend than any other Sith, but I do care about finding Baras’s underlings.”

“And you are telling us you are one of these underlings?”

“Are you suggesting that one of us is an Imperial?” said a Jedi.

“I’m outright saying that.”

“A pathetic trick,” said one of the other masters. “He’s in over his head and makes a desperate play to destabilize us.”

The woman had been very quiet. Jhonnen narrowed his eyes at her.

“Be reasonable, Sith,” said the first master. “You can’t take us all.”

“Give yourself up,” Jhonnen said, trying to affect boredom.

The woman cleared her throat. “I know this Sith. Gentlemen, this is Darth Baras’s former apprentice, who has survived his old master’s best efforts to destroy him.” She looked Jhonnen over appraisingly. “You are becoming a legend among us, my friend. I am thankful you’ve given me a chance to save myself.”

“Master Injaye, you?” said one of the other masters.

“All these years, right under your nose. I was to lead you to your deaths today. Instead I’ll watch my new friend destroy you.”

Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest. “Actually, I think I’ll leave you to them. Could be funny.”

“What?” she gasped.

One of the other masters smiled a little. “The tides have turned Injaye.”

The other one looked at Jhonnen. “We were on a suicide mission. We’d be walking to our deaths if not for you.”
“Yeah, well, at least that’s not a thing any more. Can I leave here unmolested? I sorta have places to be. Oh, you might wanna clear out though, I’m sending in a battalion to hold this place. So, yeah.”

One of the masters inclined his head. “Be well, friend.”

“Right.” Jhonnen shot him with finger guns and withdrew to the top of the stairwell to meet up with Vette.

“You actually ended that without violence.”

Jhonnen smiled at her. “So long as Injaye doesn’t try and fight her way out anyway.”

Vette socked him lightly in the arm. “You did good.”

He produced his comm as they exited the building.

“Shadow here,” said Shadow as Jhonnen called. “Dispatching Armageddon Battalion to secure the bunker you cleared. But there’s been an attack on Darth Vowrawn and your crew. They sad to patch you through when you called. Doing so now.”

Quinn appeared in Jhonnen’s palm, moving at a jog. “We’ve landed, per your orders but we can not be certain we haven’t been followed,” Quinn said. “We’re taking Darth Vowrawn to a safe house in the Imperial Legislature. Sending the coordinates now.”

“Everyone in one piece?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Vette and I will meet you at the safehouse.”

Jhonnen and Vette entered the safehouse and Jaesa stood up to greet them. Jhonnen gave her a relieved smile and walked over to where Darth Vowrawn was.

“This is heating up isn’t it? Baras has taken off the sparring gloves. Fortunately, your captain is a first rate pilot,” Vowrawn praised. “And your apprentice has exceptionally strong instincts. She felt the attack coming.”

“I’m very proud of her,” Jhonnen said. “Quinn too.”

“I’m making up for a past indiscretion,” Quinn admitted. “My commitment to my lord is unassailable now.”

“What’s past is past Quinn, embrace your future.”

“Regardless,” said Quinn. “I am yours now.”

Jhonnen’s expression crinkled as he briefly wondered if Quinn was hitting on him or not. He didn’t know what to do if Quinn was hitting on him, but he felt like, regardless of his attraction to the other man, it would be weird. Quinn would make it weird.

“This is the spirit the Empire needs,” Vowrawn praised. “You’ve successfully neutralized Baras’s agents. The end game is upon us. We must both go on the offensive.”

Jhonnen nodded. “How do you suggest we do that?”
“In a secret lair on this planet, Baras has bound and indentured an ancient Sith spirit. He feeds off this spirit’s power, stealing all her visions of the future. Everything he has built has come from her insights.”

“So we’ve gotta either kill or free it,” Jhonnen said.

“Only you have the power to break into his lair and only I know the ritual that unlocks the spirit’s bonds. Deliver me to her, and we will strike the ultimate blow and cripple Baras from within.”

“So we do this and then I finally fight Barars?”

Vowrawn nodded. “We achieve this, and I will walk you into the Dark Council chamber myself. Lead the way, I’ll come when you signal that the past is clear.”

Jhonnen nodded and, with Quinn and Vette behind him, walked over to where Jaesa was to lay out a master plan.

“Jaesa,” he said. “What did the assailant feel like?”

“It felt like the same person who attacked us on Hoth, but that’s impossible, isn’t it?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “To quote an old cliche: ‘Through the Force, all things are possible’. Quinn, I want you and Vette to head back to the ship and make sure she’s operational and out of enemy hands. Jaesa, you’ll come with me to protect Vowrawn and deal with Draahg if he shows up.”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

“When this is finished we’ll meet back at the ship and get ready for the final stage of this banthashit operation.”

Vette touched his wrist. “Come back safe,” she commanded.

Jhonnen nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

Vette and Quinn headed out to collect the ship and Jhonnen and Jaesa headed off towards Baras’s secret stronghold, trusting Vowrawn and his apprentices to follow at a safe distance.

Baras’s stronghold was fortified, slowing Jhonnen’s progress by throwing sheer numbers at him. Fortunately, Jhonnen was in top form, feeling this chapter start to come to a close and eager to be done with it all. Jaesa kept pace with him, covering his back as he leapt at their opponents.

They took a moment to breathe. “How’re you holding up, Jaesa?”

“Fine,” she said. “Just let me catch my breath, master.”

And then they were off again, continuing their onslaught on the way to the Entity’s prison. Jhonnen took down the forcefield that sectioned off the Entity’s prison and waited for Vowrawn to catch up.

“There she is,” Vowrawn said, sounding almost entranced. “The Entity. Such pure dark side energy. Is she not utterly beautiful?”

“She is,” Jhonnen lied. In truth, looking at her made his stomach twist. She was humanoid, but only in the strictest of senses, with long lanky limbs and purple smoke twisting where her eyes should have been. Her features were almost entirely obscured, shifting like they’d been made of oily
water. She called to parts of him he had buried in addition to calling to his hatred.


Jhonnen shook his head, trying to dispel the sharp shards of her voice.


“Don’t fear, Entity,” said Vowrawn confidently. “The trial is over. I know the incantation. Now it is a simple matter.”

*No, hissed the Entity. You do not understand. We. Are. Not alone.*

“*Master,*” Jaesa spun to face the door.

Jhonnen turned just in time to watch Draahg, heavily modified with cybernetics, throw out one hand and slam Vowrawn back into a wall. The Dark Councillor screamed, arching back with his arms and legs bent as far as the could, on the verge of snapping like twigs.

With one mechanical hand, Draahg pointed menacingly at Jhonnen. His eyes had been replaced with cybernetics, his hair was gone. “At last, I’ve caught up to you again. I told you, I cannot be killed.”

“Sorry,” Jhonnen said, cheekily drawing his weapons. “Have we met?”

“Don’t be obtuse. You left me burning. Baras retrieved me, used the dark side to enhance me. Now I am his greatest achie—” Draahg pedaled backwards as Jhonnen leapt at him, figuring that Draahg was talking to stall.

“My eyes are no longer flesh,” snarled Draahg, force shoving Jhonnen backwards. “I see in a new way now. And the sight of you sickens and delights me.”

“Hard pass,” Jhonnen said, blocking Draahg’s strike. “You’re not my type.”

They clashed again, Draahg using his size to force Jhonnen backwards. “In minutes, the great Darth Vowrawn will disintegrate. Then the Entity will forever be in Baras’s control.”


Jaesa struck low and caught Draahg in the stomach, ripping her lightsaber out his side. Draahg force slammed her backwards into a decorative column. Jaesa slumped down.

Jhonnen spun and kicked Draahg in the head and slammed him into the ground.

“Jaesa?”

“I’m fine,” Jaesa said, pulling herself to standing.

*The death field. Dies. With Draahg.*
Jhonnen sliced through Draahg’s neck. Vowrawn hit the floor as Jhonnen carved Draagh’s head into quarters just to be certain.

“Such a finish,” Vowrawn said breathily. He shook his arms to dispel the after effects. “Never felt so much pain. I fully expected to die.” He smiled at Jhonnen, an appraising sort of smile, eyes roaming over him. “But I am grateful to have witnessed your destruction of that monstrosity.”

Jhonnen wanted to move and help Jaesa, but he couldn’t risk appearing sentimental in front of Vowrawn so he just turned his head and offered a thin smile as Jaesa walked over to join him, rubbing the back of her head.

“So,” Jhonnen said. “Releasing the Entity?”

“Of course, of course,” said Vowrawn nodding. “But one thing first.” He turned and addressed the Entity. “Entity, is Baras aware of what transpired here?”

_Through me. The defiler. Sees all. Of this._

“Wonderful,” Vowrawn clapped his hands together in delight. “He must be twisting with fury. Now we set up the ritual.”

Vowrawn busied himself with doing just that and Jhonnen moved to the other side of the room to guard the door with Jaesa. Confident that Vowrawn was absorbed, Jhonnen put a hand on Jaesa’s arm. “You alright?”

“Headache,” she answered. “You?”

“Glad that’s over,” he smiled at her. “Thanks for having my back.”

“Of course, master.”

He sighed but didn’t stop smiling.

_Free!_ The Entity announced, Jhonnen and Jaesa turned around and headed back to Vowrawn. _Now. I am. Forgotten again. And grateful. Remember me. To the defiler._ She vanished and Vowrawn gave Jhonnen another smile.

“My friend,” he said happily. “You have been a _revelation._ It is time for you to confront Darth Baras.”

“Good,” Jhonnen said. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“As have I,” said Vowrawn. “Even now, Baras is near-indestructible. But I know of no other ways to weaken him.” Vowrawn shrugged. “Tell the Hand, the Dark Council awaits.” He spread his arms out like he was gesturing to the whole of the galaxy. “And I will be there to usher you in.”

“_You’re back!_” Vette said, rolling off the lounge sofa onto her feet as Jhonnen and Jaesa entered the ship. Jhonnen grinned at her.

“What happened, my lord?” asked Quinn, exiting the cockpit in response to Vette’s shout.

“We crippled Baras’s operation and now I have to go face him in person,” Jhonnen shrugged. “Vowrawn seems to think there’s a good chance I can beat him, but even without all his tricks he’s a powerful force user so I’m admittedly nervous.” He shrugged to pass this off as nothing. “Take us off world, Captain. The situation on Corellia is still perilous.”
The Imperial forces weren’t able to get dug in. Probably because the Republic still held the Bastion, something that was almost certainly Jhonnen’s fault.

“Yes, my lord.” Quinn left to do just that and once he was out of the room Vette folded her arms around Jhonnen.

“I’m glad you’re alright.” Her lekku shifted with affection and she knocked her head into his lightly.

“Me two,” he admitted freely. “Did you guys have any trouble?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Vette said with a shrug. “Quinn’s not a terrible shot.”

Jhonnen smiled at that, snorting a peal of laughter. “Quinn’s not a terrible shot,” he repeated, shaking his head.

“What?” Vette asked.

“I think that’s the closest you’ve come to paying him a compliment. Ever.”

Vette gave an indifferent shrug. “Remember how I was convinced he was plotting against you?”

“Yeah.”

“Was I right?”

Jhonnen made a vague ‘eh’ing noise.

Vette socked him in the arm. “Dumbass.”

Jhonnen rubbed the spot and leaned his head against her shoulder. “You’re so mean to me,” he complained.

Vette chuckled. “And you seem to like it.”

“It’s… familiar,” he admitted.

“Kira?”

“Kira,” he confirmed. He let go of her and made his way over to the holoterminial to contact the Hand.

Servants One and Two appeared in the stream of light. Servant One studied Jhonnen and gave an appraising nod. “Baras’s leverage is gone. Vowrawn is preserved. Baras’s bid to be named Voice of the Emperor is crippled. What remains of Darth Baras is yours, Wrath. He has gone to Korriban. Do as you must.”

“I will, thanks,” Jhonnen said, too exhausted to fill his role.

“Darth Vowrawn returns to Korriban as well. Baras dare not strike at him within sight of the Dark Council.”

“The hinges are gone from the door,” said Servant Two.

“Vowrawn will authorize your clearance to land and usher you into the Dark Council chamber,” continued Servant One. “The Dark Council doesn’t take kindly to intrusions and Baras still has
support there. Vowrawn will back you, then you must express the Emperor’s will.”

“Unleash the Emperor’s Wrath!” commanded Servant Two.

The conversation ended and Jhonnen hung up. He strolled into the cockpit and gave Quinn a tired smile. “Take us to Korriban in a roundabout way. I want to rest up before facing Baras.”

Quinn nodded professionally. “At once, my lord.”
Finishing Touches

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen deals with Baras and Vitreous.

“My lord,” said in Quinn as Jhonnen entered the galley for his morning caf. “I have taken it upon myself to look into something of importance.”

Jhonnen raised an eyebrow. “If I let you kill any more Moffs high command is going to think I’m making a point.”

Quinn looked at him and chuckled.

Jhonnen dropped his caf. “Did you just… I didn’t know you were allowed to laugh.”

“When I’m off duty,” Quinn said, clearing his throat. “New hyperdrive support tech is being developed. The Empire is negotiating for exclusive purchasing rights, but it could take months to be available.”

“I’ll write it down so I’ll remember to jump in front of it when they’re available.” Jhonnen waved Quinn out of the way and knelt to clean up the mess he’d made.

“I’ve been saving my commission and was able to pull strings to acquire the latest alluvial dampers. For your ship.”

Jhonnen looked up at stared at him. “Quinn, that can’t have been cheap.”

“I did an exhaustive cost analysis, and this is by far the most sensible use of my credits.”

Jhonnen straightened and disposed of the paper towels he’d used to clean up the spill.

“These dampers are so efficient, they reduce the system’s refractory period by thirty-two-point-nine percent.”

“That is impressive, but we have a budget for a reason. I mean, yeah it’s a little strained right now because our status is up in the air while Baras is on the Council but—”

“It’s a gift, my lord. I wanted to get you something.”

Jhonnen flushed.

“Once I have them installed, we’ll be able to make successive light speed jumps with one-third less waiting time.”

“Damn,” Jhonnen said quietly, still staring at Quinn who had gotten him a gift.

A practical and stupidly expensive gift.

“Next time we land I’ll get them installed.” Quinn raised his cup of caf in something like a toast and turned to leave, heading towards the cockpit to being his day.
“Uh… thanks? Quinn?”

“You’re welcome, my lord,” Quinn said without slowing down, much less stopping.

Nodding to himself, because that was very nice but also what the fuck, Jhonnen poured himself a new cup of caf and settled on the sofa.

The engine room door opened and Vette hurried out. She looked around, spotted him, and rushed over. “She found her!” Vette announced. “She found her! Mother was sold to a Hutt on Tatooine years ago. She works in a small shop there. Tivva found her, and she’s headed to Tatooine already. We need to go meet her as soon as we can!”

Jhonnen nodded. “Take the shuttle first, I’ll meet you there as soon as I’ve dealt with Baras.”

Vette looked disappointed.

“If I let him go to ground it’ll be another six months of this banthashit.” He frowned. “But I should be at Korriban tomorrow. I’ll handle Baras as soon as I can and catch up.”

Vette nodded. “I wonder what mother will think of me now.”

Jhonnen smiled at her. “I don’t think it’s possible for her to be anything less than impressed.”

Vette smiled at him. “I’d better go pack.”

He headed back into the engine room and Jhonnen stood up and headed into the cockpit. “I’ve changed my mind, Captain. Get up to Korriban as fast at you can.”

“Yes, my lord. What’s changed?”

“I need to wrap this up to meet Vette on Tatooine,” Jhonnen shrugged. “Once we land, I’ll leave you and Jaesa here to handle the dampers and protect the ship while I head to the Dark Council chambers to deal with Baras.”

“Alone, my lord?”

Jhonnen nodded. “I don’t want to expose Jaesa to the most powerful Sith in the galaxy yet and Baras might just break your neck for turning on him.”

Quinn cleared his throat. “I see, my lord.”

Jhonnen smiled at him. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.”

“Yes, my lord. Best of luck.”

“You’re here!” Darth Vowrawn said over the holoterminal as Jhonnen called to let him know he’d arrived. “The anticipation fills my veins with fire. I feel a hundred years younger. I can’t wait to see Darth Baras’s face when I introduce you to the dark council.”

Jhonnen very nearly said something snide about how no one ever saw Darth Baras’s face, but being as he still wasn’t sure about Darth Vowrawn, he elected not to.

“I’m ready,” he said. “I’ll head into the the Academy immediately.”

“Meet me in the ante chamber to the Dark Council. No one will dare obstruct you on the way
there.”  

Vowrawn flickered away.

Jhonnen exhaled.

He walked into his room and changed into his sithiest outfit, complete with cape. Then, dressed for the occasion, he summoned Jaesa and Quinn to the holoterminal. “If this goes well, I should call in a little bit to let you know that Baras is defeated. If I don’t call in an hour, leave the system.”

“With respect, my lord, if you fail, Baras will hunt us down. There will be nowhere to hide from him. I would rather face my death waiting for you.”

“The Captain mirrors my thinking,” said Jaesa. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

“You two are impossible,” Jhonnen sighed. “But fine, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He left the ship for the orbital and took the shuttle down to Korriban. The cold wind was still familiar, even though he hadn’t felt it in three years. He remembered the first moment he’d touched down on the red soil after being transferred from Dromund Kaas.

Vitreous had been so proud.

Jhonnen’s stomach twisted to think how much more proud Vitreous would be of his new station.

Leaving Korriban he’d taken a risk on the twi’lek who had saved his life. Who would become the greatest friend he’d imagined. When he’d finished up here and he’d go meet up with her and meet her mother.

And maybe Vette would leave to be with her family but the important part was that she was free to make those choices.

He made his way to the foot of the black stone building and looked up at the sloped entrance to the Academy. With one determined foot after the other he entered the Academy, heading immediately for the jet black staircase that would take him to the second floor—reserved for Lord of the Sith and their apprentices. He continued wordless until he reached the elevator that connected the second and third floor. The guards challenged him with a glance.

Jhonnen held his ground, exhaling through his nose. “Darth Vowrawn is expecting me.”

The guards nodded and stood apart for him to pass through. “Of course, Lord Wrath.”

Word had apparently spread. Jhonnen pictured Vowrawn with a holoportrait of him, beaming like a proud parent “yes this is the Emperor’s Wrath, isn’t he precious? He’s going to put Baras in the ground.”

He smiled a little at the thought and cleared it off his face as the elevator took him up to the third floor.

*Deep exhale, Jhonnen thought, carry yourself like the damn Wrath.*

On the third floor he looked around, lost for a moment because he wasn’t sure where the council chambers themselves were and he didn’t want to wander around like an idiot.

He had to pick a direction, so he did, and trusted to the Force that he was going the right way. Which felt a whole lot like wandering blindly.
But wandering blindly worked and he turned a corner to see Darth Vowrawn standing beside Lord Rathari of all people.

Jhonnen cocked his brow in question.

“Lord Rathari found me and expressed his wish to be here,” Vowrawn said fondly. “A passionate young man.”

Jhonnen looked at Rathari, who shrugged, apparently unashamed of however he’d expressed himself to the old Darth. “I told you I’d have your back when you faced Baras,” said Rathari. “I want to hear him scream.”

“If it comes down to a fight between Baras and I, stay out of it. I want to beat him fairly.” And squarely. And into a twitching pulp.

“Rathari’s presence will show the rest of the Dark Council that you have Sith support,” Vowrawn said. “Baras has called a special session of the council to make his claim as the Emperor’s Voice official.” The old Sith chuckled a little. “I’m fashionably late. Your former master and the most powerful Darths in the galaxy await. The play is yours.”

“Well,” Jhonnen rolled his shoulders back. “I’d better go make it then.”

He followed Darth Vowrawn into the council chambers, Rathari bringing up the rear, and watched Darth Baras pace the council floor.

“That had better be Darth Vowrawn coming through those doors,” Baras said, irritation dripping into the syllables.

“It is,” Jhonnen said lightly. “Also he brought company.”

“Interesting,” said one of the Darths, a tall man with shoulder spikes you could mount a flag on. Another Darth slumped back in his seat. “This isn’t the time for one of your games, Vowrawn.”

Games? Jhonnen thought. And then considered who Vowrawn was as a person. He wasn’t… no. Rathari was apparently Vowrawn’s new… Jhonnen shook his head, “I’m here as the Emperor’s Wrath, ordained by the Hand and here to put Baras in his place. Hard.”

“Listen to truth,” said Vowrawn, taking his seat with Rathari standing near at hand. “You are the victims of a ruthless and deceitful power grab.”

“The Voice would never share the way Baras pretends. The will of the host is completely subsumed by the Emperor,” Jhonnen explained. “No one could stand up to his supreme will.”

Baras clicked his tongue, sounding almost bored. “Vowrawn, for whatever reason—greed, jealousy—you’ve refused to accept reality. This is a desperate attempt. Hear me, Dark Council. This child is not our Emperor’s Wrath—he is Vowrawn’s illusion. The Emperor will inform me what is to be done with Vowrawn. For now, assist me in destroying this rabble.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow and folded his arms over his chest. “If you were the Voice, you could obliterate me with ease. But you’re not. You’re a broken down old man whose power structure has been torn down around his ears, pleading on his last legs for someone else to take care of a problem you failed to solve yourself. ‘Always one step ahead’ my muscular ass cheeks.”

Vowrawn chuckled.
“Fine,” huffed the Darth who had told Vowrawn to stop playing games. “Let us swat this gnat and move on.”

“No,” said shoulder spikes, standing. “Baras claims to be the Voice; this lord claims to be the Wrath, I will not provoke the Emperor. The one who lives speaks truth.”

An old school way of handling the problem, but Jhonnen was okay with that and it was the sensible action if they weren’t sure where the Emperor’s favor lay.

“Fine,” sighed Baras. “The master will grant the slave’s last wish. The Emperor calls for your death. Attack me if you dare.”

Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers. He lunged forward.

Baras had height and weight on him, and a low-center of gravity that made just bowling him over functionally impossible. Jhonnen had to play things intelligently.

And he did, he parried first, walking counter-clockwise around Baras and then dropped his guard in a feint so that Baras over extended and Jhonnen could kick his knee hard to the side.

Baras grunted.

Jhonnen kept his head and stay mostly defensive. His advantage was his youth and his skill, but he was probably outmatched in sheer force power.

That hadn’t saved Wyellett.

It would not save Baras.

Old men who were out of practice.

Baras threw his mask to the floor, revealing a bald human lined with dark side corruption coursing in rivers down his cheeks. But, as Jhonnen had predicted three years prior, Baras had an open, honest face because he’d gotten into the habit of lying with a mask on.

And fear was written all over Baras’s face.

“Had enough, Child? Can you feel your grip on life slipping?” He shot lightning from his fingers that Jhonnen blocked with one lightsaber. “Why persist in this futile gesture of vengeance? Let go, embrace your death.”

Jhonnen laughed. He couldn’t say ‘I have people to go home to,’ in front of the most powerful Darths in the galaxy, but he could laugh. Deep, belly laughs. He shook his head and side-stepped the lightning. “I’m not even out of breath.”

“Your champion will fall, Vowrawn,” Baras promised. “And you’ll be next.”

“Is that coming from you or from the Emperor, Baras? It’s hard to tell the difference.” Vowrawn said, sounding bored.

“Don’t mock me, fop,” howled Baras. He threw more lightning at Jhonnen. “Your patron just ensured that your suffering will be epic, youngster.”

“I think I’ll take my chances,” Jhonnen said, blocking with both sabers and charging forward, lightning crackling half a foot from his cheeks. He dropped low into a slide at the last minute and tangled his feet around Baras’s bringing the Darth to the floor. First to his feet Jhonnen cleaved
Baras’s head from his shoulders in a single swing, sending it careening through the air to land in one of the empty chairs.

He turned around to look at the most powerful dark lords in the galaxy, his breath like fire in his lungs, the victory like alcohol fumes in his brain so he was drunk with it. “Any questions?”

“At last,” Vowrawn said with a happy sigh. “The end of Baras. The air clears, and my lungs breathe deeply again.” He smiled at Jhonnen. “You have proven that you are truly touched by the Emperor. The Dark Council knows that the Emperor’s Wrath has free reign.”

“You are acknowledged, Wrath,” said shoulder-spikes. “Your actions will not be challenged as long as they do not contradict our own.”

Jhonnen nodded his acceptance of that.

“You are answerable only to our ultimate master,” said Vowrawn.

Later, that would be terrifying. Right now, Jhonnen was still drunk on his victory and drunker still on the victory to come. Because if he was answerable to no one but the Emperor, then no one would step in to stop him from claiming Vitreous’s head.

“For the Empire,” he said in his best Quinn impression, standing as straight as a rail.

“Let the enemies of the Empire tremble!” said Vowrawn, rising to his feet and thus signalling all the other Darths to rise. “Darth Volens, the Emperor’s Wrath, shall consume them all!”

Jhonnen, now apparently a darth, inclined his head and made his exit. He left the Academy itself and took the shuttle back to the orbital. He called the ship while the shuttle was in flight.

“My lord,” said Quinn.

“It’s done and I’m apparently a Darth now.” Jhonnen grinned a little bit.

Quinn did not smile back. “Call Vette, my lord.”

The smile dropped away from Jhonnen’s face. “Is something—”

“She asked me to have you call her immediately, my lord. She was crying.”

Jhonnen’s stomach dropped out from under him. He hung up on Quinn without another word and dialed Vette’s frequency.

She met him with wet eyes and miserable lekku.

“Hey,” he said as quickly and as gently as he could. “Hey what’s wrong?”

“Can you get to Tatooine?” Vette asked, the words stressed and desperate. She wiped an eye with the heel of her hand. “I just need you here.”

“I’ll be there as fast as possible,” Jhonnen promised. “Hang on. I’ll have Quinn push the engines and everything. Will you be alright until I get there?”

Vette took a deep breath and nodded.

Quinn pushed the engines hard and a day and a half later Jhonnen had landed on Tatooine. Vette
met him in the hangar and threw her arms around him, pressing her face to his neck. He could feel tears.

“She’s dead,” Vette said weakly. “That fucking Hutt worked her to death.”

Jhonnen folded his arms around her and held her tight, unable to think of anything comforting to say because nothing could lessen the death of a mother. After a minute, Vette sniffled and pulled away. “Tivva’s waiting for us at the shop where… where Mother used to work.”

“I’ll cover funeral expenses,” Jhonnen offered, unsure what else he could do.

“Tivva’s Moff has that covered I just… I couldn’t face this on my own.”

Jhonnen took her hand and squeezed it. “Hey, neither of us has to be alone again. We’re a team.”

She squeezed his hand back and, without letting go of it, lead him through the Mos Ila streets to the small shop where her mother had been forced to work. “Tivva wants to go after the Hutt that… that did this”

Jhonnen nodded.

“I don’t know if…” Vette exhaled. “I know he needs to die but I’m not sure I can do it.”

Jhonnen squeezed her hand. “Do you need to kill him yourself or do you just need to know that it’s done?”

“I don’t want to lose my sister to it. Storming a Hutt’s palace is… it’s insane but she won’t listen to me. I talked her into waiting but now that you’re here she’s going to want to move on it.”

“Vette, I physically can’t make myself talk your sister out of this. My whole life has been about getting revenge for the murder of my mother.” He stopped walking so she was forced to turn around to face him. “But if you just need to know that it’s been handled and have someone keep an eye on your sister, I can do that.”

She squeezed his hand again. “Thanks, Jhonny.”

Tivva was easy enough to convince. Jhonnen left his lightsabers with Vette and packed a blaster. They dressed Tivva in a dancer’s rainements and set Jhonnen up as a slaver come to barter with the mighty Whuddle the Hutt. At first the Hutt was skeptical, but Tivva was very beautiful, and Jhonnen had inherited his mother’s con-man smile.

When it was dark and most of Whuddle’s palace was sleeping, Jhonnen freed Tivva from the slave quarters and gave her the blaster. She snuck into Whuddle’s bedchamber and shot him in the face enough times to count. When this raised the alarm, Jhonnen used the Force to cover their retreat, repelling the guards and picking them off with lightning.

Jhonnen walked Tivva back to her ship and then headed for The Sanguine Tide. He yawned as the airlock closed behind him and padded silently into the lounge, the red lights guiding him back to his room.

He wasn’t surprised to see Vette on the sofa. She was chewing her lip and stroking her lekku. “Tivva is she…”

“Your sister made a clean getaway,” Jhonnen said. “I walked her back to the ship myself.”
“And the Hutt?”

“Your sister handled that, your mother is avenged.”

Vette rolled her shoulders forward and buried her face against her knees. She began to sob, small, muffled sounds. “I… I’m relieved and I hate it,” she whimpered. “I hate feeling good about someone else’s death.”

Jhonnen moved to kneel in front of her. He set his hands on her feet where they were sitting on the sofa, her knees tucked up to her chin.

“You’re going to be feeling a lot of things for the next little while,” he told her. “None of them pleasant.”

“You always know how to cheer me up,” Vette said bitterly.

“I just… you matter to me, Vette. You mean more to me than anyone else. And I’m here for you through the tremendous amount of suck you’re going to have to go through here.”

She lifted her head and looked down at him. “Can I cry in your room?”

“You can cry wherever you need to cry, and I can sit through it with you or make you caf or pretend not to notice or… or anything really. Whatever you need, I’ll do my best to make happen.”

“I love you too.”

He was grateful she couldn’t see him blush in the dark.

Vette slept in the next morning, her eyes rimmed with red. Jhonnen woke up under her and exhaled a slow and careful breath. He would have happily laid there for hours, letting her use him as a pillow, but his bladder had other ideas. Moving carefully, he slid out from under her and filled the void with his pillows. Vette opened one eye to watch him leave and he gave her a very small smile.

After using the fresher, Jhonnen headed to the galley to find a hot pot of caf and headed to the cockpit to talk to Quinn and let Vette sleep longer.

He wished he’d been permitted to sleep after Isixia’s death. It had been the extent of what he wanted to do. The thoughts sombered him at first. He leaned against the wall with his caf, missing his mother, and then a sort of giddiness rose up in his chest. There was finally nothing stopping him.

He’d reached the top. The Dark Council would only reprimand him if he worked contrary to their efforts.

Jhonnen almost skipped to the cockpit. “Take us to Dromund Kaas, Quinn,” he said, watching the stars out the window. “Quickly.”

“Of course, my lord.” Quinn looked up at him. “Has something happened?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “No, but something’s about to.”

Anticipation beat out nervousness, in his gut. He’d defeated a Darth, Vitreous was only a lord. Vitreous wasn’t one of the most powerful Darths in the galaxy, he was merely the shadow that eclipsed all light in Jhonnen’s life.
It was time to remove him.

_That’s your father_, shouted an unhelpful voice from the back of his brain. All of Vitreous’s evil aside, it was true. He was his father and he had done what he had to to make Jhonnen strong enough to survive the Empire. And it had worked, to Jhonnen’s horror. He had become one of the strongest Sith in the galaxy.

He ought to be grateful.

“My lord?” said Quinn.

Jhonnen shook his head. “Just thinking. When we get there I’m giving everyone some leave, I’ll have to spend some time sorting out my father’s estate.”

“I wasn’t aware your father had passed, my lord.” Quinn said evenly. “My condolences.”

“He hasn’t yet,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “That’s why I’m going to Dromund Kaas.”

Quinn turned his head to give Jhonnen a questioning look.

Jhonnen just shrugged.

“I see, my lord. Will you be requiring back up?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “Vitreous has taken everything I love from me. I’m not interested in adding to his collection.”

“I’ll come up with a suitable task for Vette that will keep her occupied while you’re busy, my lord.”

Jhonnen gave him a smile. “Thanks, Quinn. You’re a good friend.”

“Nah,” said Vette from the doorway. “I’m going with.”

Jhonnen and Quinn both turned to look at her. Vette was standing in the doorway with both hands curled around a cup of caf.

“You can’t.” Jhonnen said flatly.

Vette raised an eyebrow at the verb. She turned and walked back to the lounge.

Jhonnen followed her. “No, Vette, I’m serious.”

She flopped onto the sofa and looked at him.

Jhonnen’s eyes were wide with the frantic need to make her understand. “He’s killed everyone _everthing_ else I’ve ever cared about,” Jhonnen said.

“That’s not true,” Vette said. “He didn’t kill Kira.”

“He’s killed slaves who were kind to me, animals I showed kindness towards, my mother. I can’t risk him killing you too.”

Vette set her drink aside. “You have to. Otherwise it’ll hang over your head that we’re only together at the whim of someone else. That this… thing can’t survive being challenged.”
“He’ll kill you,” Jhonnen pleaded. “I can’t handle that.”

“Then don’t let him kill me,” Vette said, more evenly than Jhonnen felt was fair. “You’re the fucking Wrath of the Emperor, you can think of something.”

Jhonnen made a high whining noise in the back of his throat and Vette rose to her feet. She set her hands on his shoulders, a solid two inches taller than he was, and pressed her forehead to his. “It’ll be fine.”

Jhonnen let his shoulders slump. Vette twined her arms around his neck. “We’ll be fine.”

Quinn went to do whatever it was Quinn did to relax and Jaesa went to visit her parents in Kaas City. Jhonnen and Vette took a short range shuttle across the jungle to the small country estate where Jhonnen had spent seven years of his life before the Academy. Jhonnen’s skin began to crawl as soon as they passed through the gate and the large walls he had thought of as unscalable.

Vitreous was waiting for them in front of the house. A huge man who looked like if someone had multiplied his son by three. Vitreous’s yellow eyes roamed over Jhonnen’s face, looking for weakness. They moved to Vette and Jhonnen cleared his throat to command their attention.

“It is an honor,” said Vitreous, dropping to kneeling. The rest of the household followed suit. “What service can we provide the Wrath?”

The wind went out of Jhonnen’s sails and his posture shifted from false confidence to trying to make himself small. “You heard?”

“I keep track of my blood, Lord Wrath.” Vitreous lift his head to look at him. “Have you come to make good on your promise?”

Jhonnen nodded mutely. How many times had he screamed I’ll Kill You! only to be bounced backwards off a wall hard enough to crack his skull.

Vitreous rose to standing. With one hand he banished the slaves. “I’m proud of you, Jhonnen, to have risen from mewling whelp to the Emperor’s enforcer in three short years.” Vitreous gave him a hard smile. “You truly are my son.”

“I am Isixia’s son,” Jhonnen said numbly. “And you’re going to pay for her death.”

Vitreous raised a questioning brow, his smile affixed. “And you could do it. I can sense the power radiating from you. The strength you’ve gained from your hatred. Send your slave away and we’ll settle this.”

“She’s not my slave,” Jhonnen took a breath. “She’s my friend.”

Vitreous laughed. “So you really haven’t learned your lesson.” He extended a hand to curl his will around Vette’s neck. Jhonnen darted forward. He slammed both of his arms into Vitreous’s outstretched arm and shattered it at the elbow.

Vitreous howled and cradled the arm to his chest.

“We’re not finishing this,” Jhonnen said, panting through his fear and his anger. “Mom didn’t get to defend herself, neither do you.”

“You’re fast.” Vitreous breathed. “Do you have the resolve?”
Jhonnen ground his teeth together and severed Vitreous’s head from his neck. He dropped his lightsabers, shoulders beginning to shake. Jhonnen tilted his face up into the Kaasian rain and screamed.

He wanted to feel better but with Vitreous lying dead he was forced to realize that what he’d wanted was his mother back, as if there was some magic that would have returned her to him once Vitreous was defeated. He could almost smell deathsticks and cheap perfume under the pounding rain. Vitreous, in the end, hadn’t been the sneering villain Jhonnen had needed. He’d been proud of how far Jhonnen had come. If he hadn’t reached for Vette, Jhonnen may have lacked the will to kill him at all.

A hand settled on the small of his back. Vette came up around his side and set her temple on his shoulder.

“…” he lied, tears coursing down his face, lost in the rain.

“I know,” Vette said. “We should go inside and deal with your estate.”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose and followed her into the building.

There was nothing from the estate that he wanted. But without his own power base, he needed somewhere to start. He had a large stipend from the treasury now, and he’d inherited some from when Baras had been cast down. Vitreous’s estate would be split between Jhonnen and Vitreous’s two apprentices. Jhonnen wondered if they’d make themselves an issue. He wondered if anyone loved Vitreous enough to avenge him.

Vette handled most everything with the estate, and then she walked Jhonnen back to the shuttle. He stared at the floor until she pulled him over so his head was resting on her shoulder.

“It’s over.”

“Thank you for coming,” Jhonnen said numbly. “I thought… this was supposed to feel different.” He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes. “You have your own hurt you should be dealing with.”

Vette squeezed him with the arm she had draped around his shoulders. “I am. But you’re my friend and you need this.”

Jhonnen nodded. He thought about Kira. He wished he could reach out to her and know that she was okay.

Now that Vitreous was dead, maybe he could look for her.

She had hated the Sith, but maybe she would look past that and just see him for what he was, what he’d always been.

Back at his Dromund Kaas apartment, Jhonnen took a shower and pulled himself together. He emerged from the shower to discover that Vette had ordered in, made sure that Jaesa was staying the night at her parents, and put on a documentary about mynocks that promised to be supremely ignorable.

She gave Jhonnen a small smile. “Figured we both needed some down time.”

Jhonnen nodded and heaved his whole heart into his mouth. “You know, I really love you, Vette.”
Jhonnen is summoned to deal with Darth Malgus’s ‘New Empire’ and assignment that becomes personally fraught.

Jhonnen watched Darth Malgus’s declaration to the HoloNet from the safety and comfort of his ship. He stretched back and sighed before calling out. “Quinn? Are you seeing this?”

“Yes, my lord. Set course for Ilum?”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said bitterly, leaving off the bit where he said that this looked like the sort of thing the Dark Council was going to make his problem. Malgus made some good points, actually. The Empire was so far up its own ass that it was falling all over itself. Embracing alien cultures could only make it stronger. An Empire that embraced rather than ostracized would be a better place.

But the Dark Council wasn’t going to see it that way. They’d see Malgus making a power grab and the heresy of calling himself Emperor and they’d send Jhonnen to go deal with it. Because he was the Empire’s personal trash collector if the Emperor didn’t need him for something specific.

The Emperor hadn’t needed him for anything since Baras and Jhonnen was fine with that. He’d take dealing with the councilors over dealing with the Hand any day of the week.

Sure enough, shortly after Malgus’s speech, Jhonnen’s ship received a priority transmission from Darth Marr, the self-appointed head of the dark council. Where most of the dark councilors had embraced what Jhonnen privately called ‘the sith-wingspan’, Marr had gone in another direction. That direction was up, with spikes on his shoulders that you could mount a flag on.

It was actually something of a miracle Marr hadn’t.

“I will assume you’ve seen Malgus’s proclamation,” Marr said in his usual raspy voice.

Jhonnen nodded. “I’m already on my way to Ilum.”

“We’ve received word from the Republic proposing a temporary alliance to deal with Malgus’s forces. Your team will be working alongside a pair of Jedi.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow. “They do know we’re working together, right?”

“Yes, but do not allow yourself to become complacent. This Jedi has been on the Dark Council’s radar.”

Jhonnen nodded his understanding. “I’ll contact you when the usurper is dealt with.”

The comm clicked off.

Jhonnen tilted his head back and hollered for everyone to meet him in the living room. “Quinn, once we land make yourself useful to whoever’s in charge. Pull my rank if you have too, I’ll be
more comfortable knowing you’re handling any strategy because you’re good at making me not die. Jaesa, Vette, you two are coming with me to deal with the Jedi.” He paused. “Er… working with the Jedi. Don’t kill them. Unless they start it. Then…” he sighed. “You know what I mean.”

Everyone nodded.

Jhonnen smiled at his crew. “We should be at Ilum in a few hours, get ready.”

He followed Jaesa back to her room. “This is our chance,” he told her.

Jaesa gave him a confused look.

“To get you back to the Republic,” Jhonnen explained. “I can probably strike a deal with the Jedi if they’re anything like Timmns. We can get you home.”

“This is my home, Master.”

“Jaesa,” Jhonnen sighed. “If you stay you will become Sith. It’s an insidious thing. You already use the Dark Side of the Force when anyone is monitoring you, you’re figuring out the ins and outs of sith hierarchy. You need to get home now before you sink too far into what this life will make of you.”

“I can’t just abandon my parents!” Jaesa tried.

“I can get your parents out,” Jhonnen said, being only mostly sure of that. “I can express my ‘displeasure’ with your choices and ‘go after’ them.”

Jaesa sighed and tried one last avenue. “But we’re making progress with the light-leaning Sith, Master.”

“Progress that will get everyone on this ship killed if it’s discovered,” Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest. “If it was just your life and mine, Jaesa, I’d probably be more interested in helping, but it’s not. They’ll take it out on Quinn and Vette too. They can’t protect themselves against the council. Quinn’ll be killed and Vette will be lucky if that’s all they do to her.” He wouldn’t let anyone collar Vette again.

“Do you really want me to leave?” Jaesa asked.

Jhonnen let his shoulders slump. “I like you, Jaesa, I like you a lot. But yes, I want you to go somewhere safe. Somewhere where your talents can be used for something that isn’t underhanded. And I think this is our best bet.”

Jaesa frowned and wiped her eyes with her hands. “I’ll miss you.”

Jhonnen set his hands on her shoulders. “I like you, Jaesa, I like you a lot. But yes, I want you to go somewhere safe. Somewhere where your talents can be used for something that isn’t underhanded. And I think this is our best bet.”

Jaesa frowned and wiped her eyes with her hands. “I’ll miss you.”

Jhonnen set his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll miss you too. But I’m positive that this is what’s safest for everyone.” He forced a smile for her and then turned and left, heading back to his room to get his winter gear together.

Vette was sitting on the bed. “Jaesa alright?”

He nodded. “She’s alright. Not happy with me, but that’s okay.”

“What’s happenin?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You’ll see for yourself in a little while, honestly.”
Jhonnen felt a presence when they touched down on Ilum. He remembered feeling it on Voss, the sensation of something so pleasant and familiar that it was almost jarring. Jhonnen frowned but there wasn’t any time to place it as his people peeled off in different directions and he had to watch his feet to keep from slipping on the corrugated metal of the shuttle pad.

Quinn went to help Command and Jhonnen, Vette, and Jaesa took the small shuttle to the trenches where they were supposed to meet their Jedi “allies” for the onslaught.

He heard the voice—her voice—as soon as he landed.

“Look, I just don’t think we can trust them. The minute the stealth fleet is down that Sith is going to try and plant a lightsaber at the base of your spine.”

Jhonnen froze. He raised one hand, shaking badly, and tried to breathe.

“Jhonnen?” Vette put a hand on his shoulder.

At the name, the Jedi woman turned around. Tall, with copper red hair and a scar on her cheek. Bereft of dirt and grime and not wearing six shirts, Jhonnen only barely recognized her.

But she felt right. Safe and bright. His beacon whenever he got lost in the tunnels near the refugee camp on Nar Shaddaa. The promise that she was with him. She was lost too.

“Kira?” he hated how the name shook as it came out of his mouth.

The Jedi’s eyes went wide. Her mouth opened and then she covered it with both hands like she was on the verge of screaming.

The Jedi at Kira’s side reached up and put a hand on her shoulder. He was short and human with brown skin and silver eyes. He frowned a little, taking Jhonnen in. “Kira, who is this?”

Vette’s hand tightened on Jhonnen’s shoulder. He tried to think of something to say, something less stupid than ‘you’re alive’ or ‘I missed you’ or ‘you’re a Jedi?’

“You’re Sith,” Kira said after a moment, the words coming out numbly.

Jhonnen nodded. He wanted nothing so much as to take it back. To lie to her and say that he wasn’t. He had never wanted this. All he’d wanted was to go home, to her and his mother. What came out was, “I’m sorry.”

Like that would make it alright.

Like anything could make it alright.

Kira swallowed, she looked away. “Come on, Kat, Malgus isn’t going to stop himself.”

The Jedi at Kira’s side nodded and then looked back at Jhonnen. “I’m Katsulas. We’ve been assigned to work with you to topple Malgus.”

Jhonnen nodded. “It’s a pleasure,” he said, trying and failing to not look back at Kira. He had a thousand questions and every one of them turned to ash in his mouth. “I’m…” he couldn’t give Kira his Darth name. He wouldn’t. “Jhonnen. This is Jaesa and Vette.”

Katsulas nodded to both girls.

Jhonnen took a cleansing breath. “Shall we?”
The five of them headed into the fray, Jhonnen falling in lockstep with Katsulas because neither of them trusted the other behind them.

Katsulas had picked up the same habits as Jhonnen, being short and wiry had left them fierce and exploitative of gaps in the enemy's guard. They just didn't have the reach to hang back. They didn’t fight together as much as around one another and against the same enemies. They managed to keep from getting in one another’s way because Katsulas tended to go high and Jhonnen tended to go low.

Jaesa and Kira mostly provided support for their specific combatant and Vette harassed the enemy with blaster fire from the back rank. Jhonnen couldn’t help wonder how it must look, showing up with an extra person when it had just been Kira and her...

Her whatever Katsulas was.

They seemed... close.

They took a short breath in the shadow of Fort Barrow and Jhonnen forced his tongue to speak, fixing his gaze on the pair of Jedi and then shifting it to being wholly on Katsulas because looking at Kira ached and he needed to focus. “Jaesa’s not Sith,” he said, looking at Katsulas. “I never corrupted her or whatever your council thinks happened. Everything I did, I did to protect her from my master.”

Katsulas blinked as though startled and then stared at him questioningly.

“Take her back to the Republic with you.” Jhonnen ground his teeth together. “Please. You can get all the confirmation you need from Master Timmns.”

“Right,” Kira said dryly. “Because that doesn’t stink of a setup.”

Jhonnen shot her a wounded look and then turned his attention back to Katsulas. “I can tell my people that you killed her and shake my fist at the sky but Jaesa deserves the chance to be a Jedi again. Or... at least to not be Sith.”

Katsulas studied him searchingly for a couple of seconds, and then said, “...huh.” He looked over at Jaesa. “Is that what you want?”

Jaesa looked at Jhonnen and gave a defeated nod.

“Convincing,” Kira muttered.

Jhonnen was rolling his eyes before he thought about it.

“I feel like I could do more good against the Empire from within,” Jaesa explained. “But Jhonnen’s right, I don’t want to risk becoming Sith.”

“We’ll find you a way out, then,” Katsulas said with a nod.

Jhonnen caught Kira’s eyes and swallowed, grateful that they didn’t have time to waste exchanging heavy glances because there was a fort to siege.

Kira was haughty and beautiful, a far cry from the malnourished waif of his youth. But the way she rolled her eyes was familiar. He could feel her through the Force and damned if she didn’t still feel like home. She was mad at him, but that meant she cared.
She hadn't forgotten him.

He hadn’t even acknowledged how scared he had been that she would have just forgotten him. And maybe that was cruel, maybe it would have been kinder if she’d just been able to forget about him. But he didn’t care—she remembered and he was grateful for that.

Battling through Fort Barrow, Jhonnen sensed troops coming up from behind. He opened his mouth to say something when the warning dropped into his head a half-second before he could get the words out.

*Behind us.*

He turned and deflected the blaster fire away from Vette but when he turned back he caught Kira’s eye.

*Thank you,* he sent back.

Kira hurried ahead to the next fight, but Jhonnen felt just a little emboldened.

They reached the shuttle bay just as Darth Serevin arrived with a voss mystic in tow.

*You go low,* Kira said in his thoughts while Serevin monologued.

He gave a very small nod. When Serevin ignited his lightsaber, Jhonnen dropped, holding his weight up with both hands as he swept out with one leg, hooking his foot around Serevin’s ankle and dragging him to the ground. Kira lashed out with the Force, tossed Serevin back into the shuttle with a thunk.

By the time Jhonnen was back on his feet, Katsulas had driven his lightsabers through Serevin’s chest and was turning around. Jhonnen knocked the life back into his hands. “That was easier than I thought it was going to be.”

“I think he knew he was fucked.” Katsulas gave a small shrug.

Jhonnen and Vette both laughed.

“Jedi are allowed to say fuck?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen shrugged in response, his eyes darting to the tiny smile on Kira’s mouth that she hid when she noticed him looking.

“If they’re not, I don’t really care,” Katsulas said.

Jhonnen cleared his throat and produced his comm. “We’ve captured the stealth fighter. I’ll pilot it back to Malgus’s fortress and the fleets can follow us in.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Moff Regus. “Have you had any trouble with the Jedi?”

“None yet.” Jhonnen shrugged. He hung up and put the comm back into his pocket.

“You can fly?” Kira asked.

“Of course he can fly,” Vette defended.

Jhonnen gave her a smile. Vette grinned back at him and it was such a relief. Everything was so fucking complicated but Vette made things *simple* again. “Before we go though, can you get Jaesa
Katsulas considered and then nodded. He produced his comm and a small blue woman appeared in
the palm of his hand. Jhonnen kept his surprise to himself; Chiss defected like anyone else. “Major
Ross?”

“Sir?” the woman said in a Republic accent. Which was also weird but not really Jhonnen’s
problem.

“You were following us in, right?”

“Yes, Sir. Is there a problem?”

“No, there’s a woman in the shuttle hangar by the name of Jaesa. Get her discreetly to our side.”

“Yes, Sir.” The major saluted.

Jaesa gave Jhonnen a miserable look. “I’ll miss you, master.”

He returned her miserable look with an equally miserable smile. “I’ll miss you too. I’ll get your
parents out as soon as I’m back on Dromund Kaas.”

Jaesa took a breath and pushed her emotions aside, when her eyes opened again, they were clear.
“I’ll wait here for the commandos.”

Jhonnen gave her shoulder a squeeze and then, because he wasn’t sure what else there was to say,
he boarded the stealth shuttle and settled down in the pilot’s seat, Vette right behind him.

She put a hand on his shoulder and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “You alright?”

“Jaesa’ll be better off in the long run,” Jhonnen muttered.

“That’s not what I meant,” Vette said gently.

Jhonnen gave her a quizzical look and then the shuttle door opened again and he exhaled. “No,” he
said quietly. “But I’ve got to deal with Malgus first.”

She knocked her head against his and then settled into the copilot’s seat.

Katsulas and Kira crowded into the cockpit as well, no one really wanting to let the ‘enemy’ out of
their sight.

“So what can you tell us about this fortress?” Katsulas asked.

“It used to belong to the Emperor, I guess.” Jhonnen shrugged. “I’ve never been.”

The ambient temperature dropped two degrees after he’d said it. Jhonnen turned his head to look at
the pair of Jedi. Kira’s jaw tensed and her angry green eyes flashed down at the floor almost like
she was ashamed. It was on the tip of Jhonnen’s tongue to ask her about it, but she shook her head
once and looked back up.

Katsulas, on the other hand, had stopped breathing and looked as though he wanted to bolt out the
shuttle door; there was actual horror on his face, which was more emotion than Jhonnen had
thought Jedi were supposed to have.

Something had… happened at the Emperor’s fortress and Jhonnen wasn’t sure how to ask about it.
Kira took a deep breath and then shrugged. “At least we’ll know our way around,” she muttered.

“You’ve been there before?” Jhonnen asked, taking his eyes off the control panel and the window to look over at her.

“Don’t really want to get into it with a Sith Lord,” Kira said petulantly.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he didn’t want this. That he had never wanted this. But he wasn’t about to admit that level of weakness in front of a Jedi so he just turned his attention back to flying the shuttle.

Vette’s hand touched his shoulder and she squeezed once before it slid back to the shoulder of the chair.

The flight felt like it took a week as the silence settled thick and fog-like over the cockpit. Jhonnen measured his breathing, not to quick, he had to focus on the task at hand and then Kira would be gone again.

He didn’t want her to be gone again.

But maybe it would be for the best.

It was happening in any case.

As soon as they docked, a change came over Kira and Katsulas. Kira took point but in all the years they’d been apart, her bravado hadn’t changed, and Jhonnen knew it when he saw it. “I’m guessing he’ll be in the throne room.”

“That seems suitably dramatic,” Jhonnen said.

The deeper they went into the fortress, the less okay Kira became. It showed in the way she tensed, the way she was never still.

Jhonnen reached for her thoughts. I’m here.

He waited to be rebuffed.

Kira exhaled and her thoughts closed around him, gripping him tightly. They remained like that as they advanced. Holding one another with both hands free like they were grubby preteens all over again.

Tougher together then they were alone.

Nothing had felt more right since his father had first found him, a lifetime ago. Kira was warm through the Force, a blanketing sensation that made him feel safe. She had always made him feel safe.

He wouldn’t let anything hurt her. He wasn’t capable of letting anything hurt her.

He stuck close to Vette through the fighting, blocking blaster fire while she returned it and then springing away to head off trouble at the pass.

Kira and Katsulas stayed in front, close enough that no one could flank them, working in perfect tandem.

"You know," Katsulas said dryly. "I'm almost surprised this sort of power play doesn't happen
more often."

Left, Kira warned Jhonnen.

Jhonnen sprang, landing amidst the commandos that had tried to ambush them.

"I agree with you," Jhonnen said. "Though declaring himself Emperor is a level of gauche most
self-respecting Darths avoid."

“Probably because most self-respecting Darths want to not die,” Kat said.

Coming ’round the corner, he warned Kira as he felt lifeforms approaching, falling back into a
pattern he’d lost a decade prior.

Kira spun, deflecting blaster fire back at the commandos.

They reached the throne room and Malgus excused his New Imperial Guard, choosing to face the
four of them alone. His eyes fixed on Vette.

Jhonnen moved in front of her and glared at the old Darth. Malgus’s eyes widened with shock and
then narrowed again severely.

“At last,” Malgus said, the way he started told Jhonnen it was a canned speech. “The Republic and
Empire Allied. Tell me, Lord Wrath, did my deception sting?”

Someones that Jhonnen sort of worked for.

“Lord Wrath?” Kira asked, he could hear the betrayal.

“Long story,” Jhonnen answered. “So, you gonna tell us which one of us has ‘sworn to join the new
Empire’?” he teased.

“The offer is to your slave.” Malgus gestured to Vette. “Be free among us. More than a bed
warmer, a person in your own right.”

Vette pointed her blaster and fired at Malgus. “I’m not a slave.”

“So be it,” Malgus snapped. He waved his hand and a self destruct warning echoed around the
chamber. “When this fortress explodes it will decimate your precious fleets. Long live the new
Empire.” He leapt down from the throne to land at the bottom of the massive staircase. He threw
the Force forward and blew all of them back. Jhonnen hit the floor with both boots and catapulted
forward alongside Katsulas. With Jhonnen harassing Malgus’s left and Katsulas on his right, the
false emperor was left vulnerable to Vette’s blasterfire and Kira’s telekinesis.

But Malgus hadn’t gotten to where he was by being a slouch. In a split second he dropped his left
saber and shunted Jhonnen sideways off the narrow walkway.

He fell. Panic lanced white hot through his chest.

“Jhonny!” Vette shouted.

VETTE! He thought, opening his mouth to scream for her.

The Force wrapped around Jhonnen’s chest and heaved him upwards. He pushed against it,
propelling himself back up onto the walkway.
Are you alright? Kira sent.

Fine, he promised. Thanks.

Malgus, armed once more with both lightsabers, was dueling Katsulas on the stairs. He seemed to be struggling; the Jedi was less than half his age and in fighting condition, exploiting any weakness in Malgus's guard.

Probably, Jhonnen thought, Katsulas could handle this, but he wasn’t about to be left out. Not with the self-destruct sequence still winding down. He leapt forward and buried both lightsabers in Malgus’s back, withdrawing them and making eye contact with Katsulas as Malgus rolled down the stairs.

Katsulas looked away from him. “We need to get to the shuttles. Now!”

Jhonnen called the Imperial fleet and told them to pull back. Katsulas made a similar call as they were sprinting down the hall.

They reached the shuttle bay and Jhonnen felt Kira squeeze his thoughts.

Come with me.

Not us. Me.

He turned and stared at her, it was in his throat to say yes.

But Vette.

Quinn.

He swallowed. “I can’t.”

He turned away from Kira and boarded a second shuttle after Vette. He dropped himself into the pilot’s chair. He felt Kira in his thoughts until the distance forced them apart. It was a gentler parting than their last one, but Jhonnen still had to close his eyes to keep the tears at bay.

Vette was quiet on the return flight to the fleet. She remained at his side, gripping his shoulder with one hand, but she was quiet through Jhonnen’s explanations that Malgus had killed Jaesa and that the false Emperor was defeated.

Jhonnen eschewed any formalities or honors, returning to his ship with Vette and Quinn almost as soon as they were back on Ilum.

“Are you alright, my lord?” asked Quinn as he took them off world.

“Hmm?” Jhonnen replied distracted.

“About your apprentice, my lord. Jaesa.”

“Oh. No,” he shook his head. “No I’m not.”

Quinn studied him carefully. “You should take time to grieve, my lord. I’ll ensure that your schedule is cleared.”

“I… thank you Quinn.”
Jhonnen was left alone in his room for two days while *The Sanguine Tide* drifted aimlessly through space. He didn’t believe that Quinn bought the story surrounding Jaesa’s absence, but it was enough that he was pretending to.

Jhonnen lay in his bed, replaying the way it had felt when Kira asked him to join her. The way she’d squeezed his thoughts tightly, almost desperately. The way it felt when space pulled them apart. Again.

He exhaled and tried to just be grateful that she was alive. But she was a Jedi and the next time they met, they’d be enemies.

He would have done almost anything not to be enemies with Kira.

Someone knocked on the door and Jhonnen swung his legs off the edge of the bed as he unlocked and opened the door with a wave.

“Hey,” said Vette, standing silhouetted in the doorway. “You alive?”

Jhonnen nodded. “Sorry, I just… that was a lot.”

“I know,” with the bright light behind her, Vette’s expression was inscrutable. “Can I come in?”

He nodded again. Vette stepped into the room, closing the door behind her and therefore coming more into view. “Are you alright?”

Jhonnen opened his mouth to lie. He looked at Vette and then looked away. “I don’t know. I didn’t expect to ever see her again. And now… I don’t know what happens if we run into each other again.”

Vette settled on the edge of the bed beside him. She shrugged. “You two seemed pretty in sync during the whole thing with Malgus.”

Jhonnen was immediately reminded of what Malgus had said to Vette. He folded his hands in his lap. “I’m sorry… for what Malgus called you.”

Vette shook her head. “People are going to assume that. I’ve come to terms with it. And don’t change the subject, we can talk about that later. I just… about you and Kira.”

“We were in each other’s heads,” Jhonnen answered. “Not as deeply as we used to be, I still don’t know anything about her life or what she’s been through to get where she is. But… it was… it was familiar. It was nice.”

Vette stared at the floor and took a deep breath. “So why didn’t you go with her? I assume that was what she asked.” She shrugged. “It was pretty obvious from context.”


“I would have gone with if you asked.”

He would never deserve Vette. He loved her. He almost wished she could reach into his thoughts and know just how much he loved her. Almost. That level of transparency was… terrifying. And might cost her her friendship.

He leaned his head on her shoulder. “It’s not *just* you. If I disappear they’ll hang Quinn out to dry and… I can’t do that to him.”
“Yeah, and Quinn would never abandon the Empire.” She tilted her head to set it on top of his.

“Nope.”

“But all you’ve wanted since we met was to be reunited with Kira. And you… you threw it away.” Vette’s hand found his, her thin blue fingers curling between his red ones. “She’s really pretty.”

Jhonnen snorted a laugh. “*Stars,* she is. I mean, I had a thing for her when we were kids and it was *justified.*” He squeezed his fingers around hers. “But pretty as she is, she’s not my Vette.”

Vette gave a small laugh. “Flatterer.”

“Are we okay?”

She nodded without moving her head from his. “We’re fine. Don’t worry about what Malgus called me. *Bedwarmer* is pretty tame all things considered.”

“I should have ripped out his tongue,” Jhonnen muttered. “And like, slapped him with it.”

Vette grinned at him. “You’d have had to get under the rebreather.”

“Through the Force, all things are possible.”

Vette laughed.
Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn begin making strides towards stealing Isotope-5

“If we could set it up so you never have to bow to me again, that would be awesome,” Jhonnen said as the small craft took him and Vette to Solida Hesk’s resort.

“You’re telling me,” Vette said, sitting close to him. “I kept worrying I was going to fuck up somehow and the whole jig would be up.”

Jhonnen frowned seriously. “I’m not going to let someone disrespect you just because they don’t understand our dynamic. We’re a team. No amount of other people’s expectations is gonna change that.”

Vette leaned her head against his arm and sighed. “Quinn’s going to love this.”

“Young, probably. He gives you any trouble, let me know. I’m not willing to tolerate any… well… any unusual disrespect between you two.”

They were set down a short ways from Hesk’s resort and made the rest of the journey on foot.

A warm, gentle voice spoke in Jhonnen’s ear. “This is Lord Cytharat. There is a guard post near your landing position. I advise eliminating its protectors before they investigate.”

Jhonnen lowered his hand and relayed the message to Vette and the pair of them headed up the plateau to Hesk’s resort. They hit the guard station hard and fast.

A quake shook the post as Jhonnen opened a link to the gravity hook. Vette caught herself on his arm and let her hands drop away as Cytharat appeared over holo, Quinn and Niar on either side of him.

“I am here,” Cytharat said. “Securing the line. I gather you felt that. If these quakes continue, none of us may escape intact.”

“That would be bad,” Jhonnen said. “Here I was looking forward to getting to know you.”

Cytharat’s mouth moved with a very small smile. “Another reason to survive. Solida Hesk and her corporation hold the secrets of Isotope-5. She is currently at her resort, hosting three Hutt clan lords.”

“Manju is a spice trafficker and slaver,” said Niar. “Khobisho is a negotiator and advocate for the Cartel, and Prodoranya runs an industrial moon.”

Jhonnen nodded. “What am I looking at in terms of defenses?”

“Substantial automated security, my lord,” said Quinn. “And each Hutt brought with them the standard cadre of bodyguards. In my opinion, my lord, working from one end of the base to the other in order to silence all of the Hutt’s guards and crippling their means of escape is the safest
avenue. You need to isolate the mesa or the whole Hutt army will come down on you.”

“Thanks Quinn,” Jhonnen gave a decisive nod. “I’ll do that.”

“I will monitor your position and update you as I can,” volunteered Cytharat. “May the Force grant you strength.”

“You know he’s hitting on you,” Vette said as the link disconnected.

“What? Quinn?”

Vette wrinkled her nose at him. “No, Cytharat. He’s hitting on you hard.”

Jhonnen snorted a laugh. “No he’s not he’s just… friendly.”

Vette rolled her eyes.

“Come on, We’ve got a mesa to isolate, you can explain what you mean on the way.”

They crippled the three landing pads and sabotaged the shuttles. Jhonnen paused beneath a vine-covered terrace. Vette laughed. “That’s a good look for you.”

“What? Sweaty?” Jhonnen huffed at her.

“No I’m serious, the sun-dappled thing works.”

“Maybe we should get a picture,” Jhonnen suggested. “Make this feel a little bit like a vacation.”

He held out a hand to her and Vette walked over willingly. He wrapped an arm around her midriff and held his comm out to get a picture, her arm around his shoulders and his around her waist, grinning in the gentle Makeb sun.

He pocketed the comm. “Let’s go find Hesk before Quinn messages me asking what’s taking so long.”

Vette laughed. “I give it five minutes before he asks why we’re not done yet.”

“That man has too much faith in me.” Jhonnen sighed, shaking his head. “Also, you were kidding about Cytharat… right?”

“Nope,” Vette shrugged her shoulders. “He seems to be pretty into you.”

Jhonnen frowned.

“What, not your type?”

“I… I don’t know. I’ve never given much thought to… yeah.” Jhonnen rubbed the back of his neck. “My father was sorta always hanging over my head and getting romantically entangled with someone was just going to give him another avenue to hurt me.” He sighed. “Cytharat is pretty cute.”

Vette snorted. “If you like that sorta thing. He’s too formal for you.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Probably. Still… maybe he wants to make out. That’s supposed to be fun.”

Vette stared at him. “Wait a minute. Are you… you’ve been kissed, right?”
Jhonnen shook his head. “Where would I have found the opportunity? You?”

“I’ve been kissed,” Vette said. “Never gone any further than that but. Wow, we should have this conversation later when we can focus on it.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen agreed, hoping to have this conversation never instead. “Let’s go… Hesk. Let’s go deal with Hesk.”

Hesk’s resort was beautiful. Everything was pale while stone with blue highlights. Crisp clear water served as an accent to gently shaded terraces.

As Jhonnen fought his way through the security droids he lamented that he couldn’t have brought Vette here earlier.

When this was finished they were going on vacation.

“Snazzy,” Vette said as they reached the mansion. “Bet Solida Hesk’s got some priceless trinkets locked inside. Think she’ll mind if I grab a few mementos?”

“Knock yourself out,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “Grab an ashtray for me.”

“You don’t smoke.”

It was true, the smell of deathsticks was too much like the smell of his mother. “No, but I want an ashtray.”

“Consider it done.”

Vette looted while they went, just sticking things in her many pockets and Jhonnen cleared out the security droids between him and wherever Solida Hesk was hiding.

<< My slavers are dead! >>

Jhonnen followed the indignant shouting in Huttese down a corridor.

<< My honor guard as well. This is your fault, Mistress Hesk—you promised the Archon your home was secure! >>

“The Archon reviewed my security himself, and if you have a problem—” Jhonnen interrupted Hesk by opening the door. “Well. Why don’t you slither back and let me handle this.” She stomped over angrily to where Jhonnen and Vette were standing in the doorway. “So,” she said. “The Empire is on Makeb now? Trying to kill the Hutts while they’re in one place, or do you trot after the Republic fleet wherever it goes.”

“I do love to trot,” Jhonnen said, rolling his pale silver eyes. “So much more fun than galloping. But hey, let’s keep this friendly. I have questions, you have answers, let’s see if they match, shall we?”

Hesk frowned.

“What do you know about isotope-5?”

Realization dawned on Hesk’s face. “Isotope-5… right. Yes, my company found it, mined it for our Hutt investors. Kept it a secret by their request.” She shook her head. “Worst deal we ever made. It’s because of the Hutts that we’re going to lose Makeb.”
“How are you losing the planet?” Jhonnen tilted his head to the side. “Being forced off or…”

Hesk sighed. “Makeb only has a few weeks left before the planetary core rips itself apart. That’s what happens when you extract isotope-5.”

*I’m sorry… what? Ex-fucking-scuse?*

“The groundquakes,” said Niar in Jhonnen’s ear.

Hesk continued speaking. “No more Makeb, no more isotope… and no more fancy resort or corporation. So yes, I’ll need Hutt allies once my planet is gone.”

“Is there an evacuation being planned? Are people packing to leave?” Jhonnen asked.

Hesk shrugged. “I haven’t told anyone. I’m more worried about where I’m going next.” She produced a datapad. “Go ahead, watch my hands, I’m not triggering any alarm… there. I’ve granted access to my corporate systems.”

“Checking,” said Niar. “We’re in.”

“I have information, money, and influence and I’m just as happy to work with you as with the Hutts. Just help me survive.”

“She acts unforgivably,” snorted Cytharat. Jhonnen was inclined to agree with him.

“She not going to betray us today, and if anyone can mislead the Hutts about our presence, it’s her,” Niar pointed out.

Jhonnen frowned. “Very well, Hesk. You’ll work with us.”

“Thank you.” She lowered her datapad. “I’ll keep funneling my resources to you and keep an ear out for anything new. In the meantime, what should I tell the Hutts?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Tell them we’re chasing the Republic fleet.”

“I can sell that. Good luck out there.”

“We’ll check her corporate data and wait for you at the gravity hook.” Niar gave a tired sounding sigh. “We can chat about the end of the world.”

“Welcome back, my lord,” Quinn said, drawing himself to his full height as Jhonnen and Vette left the lift.

“Mighty Wrath,” Cytharat gave a bow.

Niar turned from what she was discussing with Captain Hanthor and gave a polite little bow.

“Welcome back. We found the isotope-5’s location in Hesk’s files. The bad news? Getting to it is a problem. The good news? Makeb won’t explode for weeks, so why worry?”

“The planet should be a bigger concern,” Jhonnen said, his thoughts full of refugees.

“With respect?” said Niar. “It doesn’t change anything. Our objective is the isotope-5, and once we’re gone, the planet’s fate isn’t our business.”

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes at her, on the cusp of saying something when Cytharat spoke up.
“She is right. The Hutts doomed this world, but it is our Empire at stake.”

“Makeb is home to millions,” Jhonnen argued. “What happens to them?”

Niar stared at him and Jhonnen stared back. She broke first and nodded. “Right… your call. Our resources are limited—but we’ll look at options. In the meantime, we’ll give you what we know.”

“The Hutts store their isotope in Stronghold One,” said Cytharat smoothly. “It is Makeb’s treasury, built to be impenetrable. Captain Quinn believes you’ll have very few problems with it.”

Jhonnen looked at Quinn, who wore an impassive expression at the scrutiny.

“The stronghold has a single entrance, walls that cannot be breached, and six levels of security, my lord,” Quinn said smoothly.

“Six,” Niar said. “Plus a prototype being assembled by the Hutts. Some kind of isotope-5-powered droid in the early stages. We’re going to need time to plan.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement. “I trust Quinn’s tactical assessment, no matter how flattering. But you have time to plan. We have weeks before the planet blows up, apparently.”

Niar frowned and cupped her chin one hand while she thought, index finger smoothing over her lips. “What about a distraction? There’s a message we intercepted....” she pushed a button and a chagrian with an assault cannon appeared in the holo.

“InterStellar Regulator Command to the Archon,” said the chagrian. “The civilians are getting restless. Had to stop a riot today, and it’ll get worse if the Republic’s involved. We’re moving the hovertanks into settlements. That’ll keep them locked down, and we’ll level city blocks if we have to.”

“What a charmer,” Vette said under her breath.

“Wouldn’t take much to start a revolt,” Niar said. “Worldwide rebellion, and the Hutts won’t have the manpower to keep us from the isotope.”

Jhonnen frowned. She was right and it was a good plan but he didn’t like the idea of using the civilian population as a prop. It made him feel like a proper Sith and he hated that.

“I don’t like the idea of using the people like that,” he said.

Niar exhaled like she wanted to throw her arms up and snap at him but fear and professionalism kept her from acting on it.

“Then we give them the chance to win, my lord,” Quinn suggested.

Lord Cytharat nodded. “You could free the settlements. Hovertanks are the vanguard of the mercenary army—armored and powerful. If you destroy them, the people could rally.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“What about propaganda,” said Niar. “Couldn’t we send a message? Incite them somehow?”

“Telling them the Hutts are blowing their planet up would probably do it,” Jhonnen said.

Niar sighed. “As you wish. I’ll lead the files.”
“Let me catch a nap and I’ll be good to go,” Jhonnen said. “Quinn, is the ship still hooked to the ring?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Sweet, I’ll be up in an hour or two, and then we’ll see about starting this rebellion.”

Vette paused. She gave Cytharat a long hard look and then took a few steps closer to Jhonnen, indicating silently that she was going to be going with him. Jhonnen wasn’t sure what to make of what had just happened, but he wasn’t about to turn away the company.

In his room, Vette set her cheek on his collar bone and snuggled against him under the blankets. “I promise everyone but maybe Quinn thinks we’re fucking,” Jhonnen said, wrapping both arms around her comfortably.

Vette shrugged indifferently. “They were going to assume that anyway.”

“Yeah, but we gave them proof.”

Vette snorted and shook her head, nuzzling closer against him. “Go to sleep, Jhonny.”

The third hovertank went down with Jhonnen’s lightsabers stuck in its control panel. He backflipped off of it and landed beside Vette.

“You did that to look cool,” she accused.

Jhonnen laughed. “Did it work?”

Vette gave his shoulder a pat. “If I didn’t know you I would have been impressed.”

Jhonnen snorted and roll his eyes. “Bet Cytharat would be impressed.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty impressed when you enter a room.” Vette stuck her thumbs through her belt loops. “Maybe if you ask really nice, Cytharat will run all over the galaxy with you.”

“Trade your company for his?” Jhonnen wrinkled his nose. “I’ll be six months dead before I trade time with you for time with any Sith.” He turned his comm back on. “The hovertanks are down.”

“Very good, my lord,” Quinn said in his ear. “Katha Niar was concerned about you being out of contact for so long.”

“I don’t like people eavesdropping on my private conversations,” Jhonnen said sternly, mostly not wanting to have to defend the way Vette called him Jhonny on occasion and Jhonnen the rest of the time.

“Yes my lord,” said Quinn. "I did explain. There’s a holoterminal in the vicinity that would have a stronger signal.”

Jhonnen found and activated portable holoterminal the regulators had been using and waited while Niar and Cytharat appeared as ghostly apparitions on either side of the device.

“My lord,” Niar said with a small bow.
“We have observed the enemy’s flight,” said Cytharat. “Riots have begun across the planet.”

“The Hutts just authorized the execution of any civilians not carrying ID. The mercenaries are demanding a raise.”

“Damn, I’d want one too,” Jhonnen said folding his arms over his chest. “What else has been happening?”

“Some of the civilian leadership seems reluctant to take this opportunity to strike,” said Niar. “We think they’re laying low and regrouping. But if we’re going to steal the isotope-5, we need the civilian leaders organizing a full-on revolt. If I set up a meet, can you push them?”

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose as he nodded. He didn’t want to push the civilian leaders. He didn’t want either himself or the civilians in that situation. “I’ll talk to them.”

“There’s a man named Pollus Avesta who’s got influence with the rebels. He’s holed up at an old plantation. You’ve already got half the planet riled up. Win over Avesta, and he’ll make sure everyone’s pointing the right way.”

“That’ll be nice,” Jhonnen said. He clicked off the holoterminal and looked over his shoulder at Vette.

“I know,” she said sympathetically. “You hate playing the mean, scary Wrath of the Emperor.”

“There is no way Niar and Cytharat haven’t seen through the act. Even with Quinn amongst them planting the leg…end…”

Jhonnen trailed off as something more important got his attention. Kira, he could feel Kira. The slick warmth in his gut that had never belonged to anyone else.

He looked around and then swore under his breath.

“What?” Vette asked. “What is it?”

“It’s Kira,” Jhonnen said, frowning. “I shouldn’t be surprised, I mean, we know the Republic is here fighting the Hutts and that guy she’s palling around with is a serious combatant but…”

“If you can feel her, she can feel you.” Vette said succinctly.

Jhonnen groaned. “And I can’t tell Niar and Cytharat without having to explain that I have a Force bond with a fucking Jedi.”

“Force bond?” Vette asked.

“We forged it when were were kids I guess. All the reaching into each other’s heads and shit. I didn’t think about it until we were fighting together on Ilum. It looks like it’s the one thing my father couldn’t break.” He shook his head. “Maybe she’ll think it’s just me. Maybe she’ll think we’re just on vacation or… something.”

“But there’s a good chance we’re not operating secretly any more.”

“Not that it’ll look any better for Kira if she tells her Jedi boss that she’s got a Force bond with the Wrath of the Emperor. Given her background I can see them complaining.”

“What, her life of crime on Nar Shaddaa makes her a warning-signs-Jedi?”
Jhonnen paused. “I never told you she was born on Dromund Kaas?”

Vette looked at him. “No. No you didn’t. You’re actually pretty spare on all of the details about you and Kira. Other than that you were best friends and then separated.”

“Oh,” Jhonnen was suddenly embarrassed. He couldn’t even blame Vette for being curious. “Well, yeah. At the time I felt like it was some serious destiny banthacrap that we even found each other on Nar Shaddaa. Both of us having fled, with differing levels of agency, the Sith.” He let his shoulders fall hopelessly. “Lots of things feel like destiny when you’re a kid.”

Vette smiled, her shoulders dropping a little. “That’s sweet.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t fuck anything up, shall we?” Jhonnen resumed walking towards the nearby plantation.

Vette lagged behind for a moment before catching up as Jhonnen wandered into a pack of harvaps. She shot the two coming at him from the sides. “Distracted much?”

Jhonnen pinched the bridge of his nose. “It shouldn’t do this to me.” He shook his head violently. “I just… all I wanna do now is go see her.”

“You definitely can’t do that.” Vette gave him a deep frown, worry at the corners of her eyes. “Are you going to be able to handle it if she shows up and tries to stop us?”

He looked at her and then looked away. Could he? Could he really face Kira as an opponent? He recalled her smile, the one that lingered on the corner of her mouth when she couldn’t believe what had just been said. He loved that smile.

“Jhonny, that doesn’t instill me with confidence.”

“I can handle her,” Jhonnen said, refocusing on Vette. “I’m not sure I can take her buddy, but I know I can take her.” For Quinn and Vette. Always any more with that singular goal. He hadn’t been enough to protect Jaesa from the risks of losing herself. He’d had to kill Pierce. But he could and would protect Quinn and Vette.

“Maybe it won’t come to that,” Vette offered over the thin hope.

Jhonnen took it. “Maybe it won’t.” He shook his head. “Keep it between us from now on, if we have to clue Quinn in I’ll… figure that out.”

Vette gave his shoulder a small shake. “I’ve got your back, Jhonnen. Regardless.”

He smiled, unable to fully articulate how much that meant to him in the moment. He cleared his throat and gestured with his thumb to the doorway. “We should probably go talk to this guy before Quinn gets on us about efficacy.”

“I can’t imagine him upbraiding you in front of people.”

“He’ll politely ask if can speak with me and then tell me how disappointed he is in my perceived disinterest because I could have done it much faster,” Jhonnen said, stepping into the plantation house with both lightsabers drawn and ignited. Avesta had guard droids, but Jhonnen went through them with ease and strolled into the room where Avesta was waiting with some of his men.

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said pleasantly.
“Don’t move, Sith! Not one move!”

Jhonnen unignited his lightsabers and hooked them to his belt. “You must be Pollus Avesta,” he said to the man in the middle of the room. “We need to talk.”

Avesta nodded. “I received your message. You freed the settlements, and I’m grateful. But why would the Empire get involved at all?”

“We don’t like competition,” Jhonnen shrugged. “The Hutts are trying to be competition. We’ve given you an opportunity to fight back. If you take it, you can organize a planet-wide attack.”

“And if we say no?” said Avestas, watching Jhonnen closely.

Jhonnen shrugged. “Then the Empire pulls out.”

“Fair enough,” Avestas shrugged. “But I’ll need to talk to the others. I can’t make this decision for the whole planet.”

Jhonnen and Vette kept to themselves, listening as Avesta argued his points with the others, and then Jhonnen patched through to Quinn and helped develop the rebels’ tactics.

Mostly it was a matter of Jhonnen sitting to one side looking vaguely menacing while Quinn offered instruction. Jhonnen’s eyes slipped over to Vette’s and she gave him a tiny smile.

He didn’t like the idea of using the civilian uprising for their own ends but… giving them the opportunity to win made it not terrible.

Not great.

But not terrible.
Jhonnen's team is tapped for a secret mission on the planet Makeb

“My lord,” Quinn said, finding Jhonnen alone in the longue. “A moment?”

Jhonnen set his datapad aside. “Yeah, sure, what’s on your mind?”

“My lord, after all we’ve been through—the good and the bad—I am dedicated one hundred percent to you and your legacy.”

Jhonnen offered a wooden smile because he wanted to believe that, but he knew that Quinn’s loyalties were to the Empire. And the Jhonnen was not the loyal servant everyone kept thinking he was. “Thank you, Quinn.”

“It goes without saying that I am here for the ‘long-haul.’” He held up his hands for the air quotes. “And that I will impart whatever skills and knowledge I can on your future disciples.”

“I’m relying on it, assuming there are any,” Jhonnen said, still feeling the wood in his smile. “You’ve got a lot to teach.”

“Thank you, my lord. Serving you is a great privilege. I’ll take no more of your time.” Quinn gave a low bow and then returned to the cockpit.

Jhonnen picked up his datapad and stared at it unseeing. Apprentices. Someday he’d have to take an actual apprentice. Probably someday soon, now that Jaesa was… safe. Jhonnen sank deeper into the seat and deeper into his own concern. An apprentice would be Sith, would expect Jhonnen to be Sith. It would be like the problem with Pierce all over again but on a much more urgent scale. Vette would be seen as a weakness to be excised or exploited. Quinn as a lackey to be used.

He wasn’t sure how long he could be ‘waiting for the right Apprentice’ without taking a more active hand in finding one. He couldn’t afford to have the Dark Council get suspicious because if they got suspicious they’d look more closely and they’d see all the parts that didn’t fit.

Jhonnen didn’t know if he’d been chosen by the Emperor, even after everything he’d seen. He didn’t know why he would have been chosen for any reason other than being quick with a lightsaber and conveniently placed. Everything built up around him was fragile. The littlest quake would destabilize it.

The former Wrath had never taken an apprentice. Maybe he didn’t have to.

What about your legacy? asked his father’s voice. Who will remember you when you’re gone?

Jhonnen bent forward and rested his head in his palms. His father had destroyed so much to maintain a legacy. The crime Isixia had been guilty of was stealing it. In taking Jhonnen to Nar Shaddaa she had stolen Vitreous’s legacy and that, more even than preemptively punishing Jhonnen for his weakness, was why she’d had to die.
Jhonnen exhaled. He didn’t want a legacy. He didn’t want to build anything that would outlast him. He wanted to see Quinn and Vette taken care of and then dissipate into obscurity.

Just for spite.

Vette settled on the sofa at Jhonnen’s side and draped an arm over his hunched back.

“That bad, huh?”


Vette raised her eyebrows at him. “You don’t really have one.”

He nodded. “I’m trying to figure out if that’s a problem or not.”

Vette gave a jaunty shrug. “I know Sith worry about that sort of thing, but is it something you want to build towards? Apprentices or kids or however you want to go about it?”

Jhonnen wrinkled his nose and then laughed. “God, can you imagine me with apprentices? Much less around children?”

Vette smiled. “You’re not much of a father figure, no.” She looked up at the ceiling. “But you’d probably be a fun dad if it happened.”

“You’d be a fun mom.”

Vette dropped her chin and looked at him. “I’ve thought about it. Not really with anyone but… I’m free. I can have kids if I want without anyone pulling them away from me or selling them off. I don’t know if I really want kids. But… it’s an option for me. Never really thought it would be.”

“I will be the coolest uncle,” Jhonnen promised. “If you decide that’s a path you want to take.”

Vette grinned at him. “You better.”

“My lord,” said Quinn from the cockpit. “Transmission incoming.”

Darth Marr appeared in the holoterminal. Jhonnen stood to address him.

“Wrath,” said the Darth. “This is Darth Marr, of the Dark Council. Once, you defeated your traitorous master before us. Now you serve a silent Emperor and his cryptic Hand.”

Jhonnen literally bit the tip on his tongue to keep from insisting that Marr get to the point.

“If you are content to stand unchallenged, then so be it,” Marr continued. “But I would test your strength for the Empire’s survival.”

“I live to serve the Empire,” Jhonnen lied. “What do you need me for?”

“The course of the war is changing. The Republic has tasted blood, and there is much you do not know,” Marr said cryptically. “The planet Makeb, on the edge of Hutt Space, is the key to victory or destruction. Come in secret, and we may discuss the coming doom.”

“I’ll set course for Makeb at once,” Jhonnen said, because he couldn’t afford to piss off anyone on the Dark Council. “End transmission.”

Once the transmission was ended he turned to Vette. “So… that was dramatic.”
“Yeah, Sith are like that.”

“I’m not like that.” He paused. “Am I?”

“Hmmmmm,”

“Come on, Vette. I’m not that dram—Quinn! Am I dramatic?”

“Of course not, my lord,” Quinn answered by rote, which did not make Jhonnen feel any better.

He huffed. “Just… lay in a course for Makeb.”

“Ugh,” Vette said, tapping the toe of her boot on the floor as they entered the Imperial Orbital above Makeb. “Imperial stations are so stuffy. Can’t wait to hit Makeb’s resorts and take in some sights.”

Jhonnen grinned at her for a moment before correcting his face to something serious. “Think a massage could dislodge Quinn’s stick?”

“The idea of him relaxing long enough to get a massage is as funny as it is unlikely,” Vette said, rolling her eyes. She brushed her lekku back. “Come on, let’s find out what Marr wanted so we can get this vacation rolling.”

“Suddenly this is a vacation.”

“You can’t bring me somewhere like Makeb and not take me to a resort, can you?” Vette said in her “mostly teasing” voice. “It’d be cruel.”

“Let’s see what Marr wants and then plan our downtime,” Jhonnen compromised. “Come on.”

They were flagged down by a droid as they entered the main room of the Orbital. “Mighty Wrath,” it said, bowing low. “Follow me, please.”

Jhonnen followed it into a meeting room and waited. At length, the droid left and was replaced by Darth Marr and a small entourage.

“Darth Volens,” Marr said sternly. “Time is short, so I will be blunt. The Empire is losing this war. Barring the unexpected or the miraculous, our total defeat will occur within the year.”

“Shit,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest. “I assume you have a plan or something or I wouldn’t be here.”

Darth Marr nodded, his masked face inscrutable and his shoulder spikes impressive. “Power plays have diminished the Dark Council. The Republic stands united while we bicker amongst ourselves.”

He really was blunt. Jhonnen couldn’t say he didn’t appreciate it, but it was also making him nervous.

“Our last chance,” Marr continued, “our only chance, is far from the front lines. The planet Makeb is the secret to victory, and it’s responsibility is yours.”

Jhonnen blinked. “Makeb. The… resort… planet.” He clarified. “Aren’t they unaligned?” And in the middle of nowhere. And why was it his problem?
“Makeb grew rich from mining and trade, becoming a neutral paradise for wealthy cretins. It escaped the war due to its tactical insignificance.”

“But it matters now?”

“Now the Hutt Cartel has seized Makeb for itself. The Hutts believe that with our ‘imminent defeat’ the time has come to chase glory.”

“And they’re chasing it on Makeb for some reason.”

Darth Marr nodded. “The Hutts chose Makeb not for its wealth, but for a substance called ‘isotope-5’. A mineral capable of twisting gravity and electromagnetic fields. The Hutts have kept it a secret, but one gram could provide a near-infinite power source. Isotope-5 could remake the Hutts into a force to rival the Republic.”

“So we’re going to steal it?” Jhonnen asked.

“Yes. But the obstacles are many.” Marr gestured to the holo of the planet spinning along beside them. “Despite the efforts of the Hutts’ mercenaries, Makeb’s leaders are requesting aid from the Republic, and the planet is on the verge of chaos. You must steal the Hutts’ stockpile of isotope-5 under cover of the conflict. Stealth is paramount—if the Hutts and Republic realize your intent, they will deploy overwhelming force.”

“Luckily I’m known for my gentle hand,” Jhonnen said, almost as an aside. He looked back at Marr and nodded. “I understand. Is it just my team and I or will I have backup?”

“You will have a limited support team—specialists capable of performing their duty and willing to serve you unto death. But, in short, you will be alone on a hostile world. With our lines crumbling, we cannot mount a full-scale invasion.”

“My lord,” said Darth Marr’s apprentice. “You’re needed with the Khar Delban fleet.”

Marr nodded, his attention still on Jhonnen. “There is a cloaked shuttle waiting to deliver you to the surface. You may establish an uplink to your team once you land.” Marr turned to leave, made it to the door and then looked back over his shoulder. “Be wary, and move with subtlety. If you fail, the Empire’s last stand will be over before it begins.” He finished leaving.

Jhonnen waited a full five breaths before he turned to Vette. He couldn’t say what he was thinking: that he could just fail. That his legacy could be the destruction of everything Vitreous had stood for.

But he didn’t want to make an enemy of Marr.

And he couldn’t destroy everything Quinn believed in.

“So… no vacation?” Vette said.

Jhonnen snorted a little laugh. “Not yet apparently. But maybe when we’re done here we’ll check out that one on Manaan you were talking about and get kolto peels.”

“I’d like that.”

As Jhonnen walked to the shuttle bay, he contacted Quinn and told him an abridged version of what was up and that when he’d established a base he’d call for Quinn to join them.
He was going to want Quinn strategizing on this. That was a guarantee.

Jhonnen tucked his comm away and walked over to the shuttle pilot.

The shuttle pilot, a human male with short black hair, gave a bow. “It’s an honor, my lord Wrath. Sergeant Defain, Twenty-first Starfighter division. Flew sorties at the Battles of Coruscant and Ilum, decorated for both.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“Never thought I’d be in Hutt Space while the Republic’s chasing our fleet. Whatever we’re after here, I hope it’s worth it.”

“You and me both,” Jhonnen said dutifully.

“I should warn you,” said Defain, “the flight’s going to be rough. Atmospheric energy charge makes landing anything larger than a shuttle impossible. Our girl here’s the right size, but she’s built for stealth, not grit. Hold on tight.”

He lead Jhonnen and Vette back to a small shuttle craft. Vette settled in the set directly next to Jhonnen.

“Bumpy ride, huh?”

“Just remember to vomit in the other direction,” Jhonnen teased lightly. “I have a reputation to uphold.”

The shuttle began to shake and jostle. Vette put her hand on Jhonnen’s leg and he put his hand over hers.

The nose of the shuttle dipped and they exchanged panicked glances. Jhonnen took his hand off of hers and curled his arm around her shoulders as the pilot started to scream.

Jhonnen pushed his will out in a bubble around him and Vette, clutching her close as they rocketed downwards and plowed into the ground.

Jhonnen woke up with a throbbing headache, but waking up was a good start. He was in his seat, upside down inside the wreckage of the shuttle.

“Vette?”

“Ow,” she shifted, also upside down and strapped in.

Jhonnen unbuckled and caught himself as he fell. He caught Vette as she did the same and then blasted the door of the shuttle open.

“What happened to our shuttle pilot?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen shook his head as he came out on the beautiful mesa they’d landed on. “I don’t feel any other life forces around, Vette. I don’t think he made it.”

Vette frowned. Then she closed her eyes and nodded.

“Are you alright?” Jhonnen asked.
“Think I bruised a lekku but, yeah, I’m alright. You?”

“Grateful we’re not paste and bruised but I think I’ll survive it.”

He curled an arm around Vette and she pressed her cheek to his shoulder. They parted after a few seconds.

Vette looked around. “It sure is beautiful.”

Jhonnen followed her gaze and nodded his agreement. The grass was green and teal, the wild trees looked like someone had taken the effort to shape them so they gracefully bowed and bent upwards. The sky was bright blue and all around them.

“We should salvage the communicator,” he said, clearing his throat. “So we can actually contact the ground team Marr set up.”

Vette nodded and wandered off to scrounge, one of her many many talents. They repaired the commm uplink.

“This is orbital support to ground,” said a woman in Jhonnen’s ear as soon as he connected his comm to the uplink. “Repeat, support team to ground. Codes verified. I don’t know who you are, and with the Hutts trying to listen in, I don’t want to. Just tell me your condition.”

“We’re bruised but intact. What can you tell me?”

“Minimal damage, got it. Top priority is to establish a corridor on and offworld. My team needs access planetside and you need an exfiltration route.”

Jhonnen nodded despite knowing she couldn’t see him.

“Shuttle flights are unreliable,” the woman continued. “But Makeb has gravity hooks for slow-speed cargo transport. Ground-to-atmosphere turbolifts, ready for capture.”

“Works for me,” Jhonnen said, rolling his shoulders back. “Where am I going?”

“Sending coordinates of a recommended site now. Opposition will be heavy. When the Hutts took Makeb, they paid off the planet’s defense force—veteran mercenary band called the InterStellar Regulators. But sweep the bunkers around Gravity Hook Seven, and you can wipe out the mercenaries and signal the all-clear. Then hit the gravity hook itself fast and quiet.”

“Sounds fun,” Jhonnen lied, shaking his head a little. “Anything else you can give me on the mercs?”

“Lots of soldiers from the Great War working Makeb for retirement. I’ll stay online, but until we’re planetside, comms will be patchy. And there’s one other thing.”

Jhonnen cocked his brow.

“Watch out for groundquakes. Couple of tremors hit the planet recently, and you don’t want to get swallowed whole.”

Jhonnen took his hand away from his ear to fill Vette in on the pertinent information. “So we’re going to capture a gravity hook to make contact with our support team, the Hutts bought of the mercenary force that used to protect the planet and we need to watch out for groundquakes.”

“Mmmm,” Vette said. “Much better than a vacation.”
“When we’re finished I will take you on an actual vacation.”

“I’m just giving you a hard time, Jhonnen.”

“I know,” he said, “but now I want one. Quinn will just have to learn to relax.”

Jhonnen checked the coordinates and led the way towards Gravity Hook Seven, keeping an eye out for wild animals and mercenaries.

Not far from the crash site, they discovered the first mercenary camp. Jhonnen hit them quickly and quietly, launching himself forward with the Force and carving through mercenaries to reach their comm devices, trusting Vette to pick off the mercs he missed with her blasters. He sent an all-clear signal before the Gravity Hook could send in a strike team and then left the bunker, heading for the next one.

“This is the problem with mercenary police forces,” Vette said. “Someone can come in and buy them off.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m inclined to agree with you, but if we’re being honest I don’t tend to think about infrastructure.”

“You should.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I neither have, nor want, a job in government. I’m just the guy they call when they need something murdered.”

“Imperial civic duty.”

“Yeah, I’m basically a garbage man.”

“Are you here to take out the trash?” Vette asked with a grin.

Jhonnen laughed. “I should say that next time I end up in a duel. I’ll either sound completely badass or like a complete idiot.”

“Or both,” Vette said cheerfully. “You’re good at both.”

They cleared out the next bunker and the ground rocked violently under their feet. Jhonnen caught Vette by the elbows to keep her upright.

“Support team to ground,” said the woman in Jhonnen’s ear. “Remember I mentioned the quakes? That was a minor one.”

“What’s causing them?” Jhonnen asked, touching his ear piece. “Do we know?”

“Makeb’s always been volatile, but local reports say it’s been especially bad this year. Geologic shifts of some sort. I’m not too worried, but I’ll keep an eye out. I’ll check in at the next bunker.”

Jhonnen lowered his hand and looked at Vette. “You alright?”

“Fine,” she confirmed. “They don’t mention the ground moving in the resort brochures.”

“Apparently it’s pretty minor but not unheard of.”

They headed for the next bunker.
“Last one,” said the voice in Jhonnen ear as they sent the third and final all-clear signal. “You should be able to hit the gravity hook without anyone sounding alarms. Play this right, and the Hutts will never know. You’ll have to assault the hook’s base, then take a lift to the docking ring. That’s where the command crew will be.”

Jhonnen nodded to himself. “Sounds straightforward.”

“Well we’re not in a hurry.”

Jhonnen couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not. He kind of hoped she was because that proved that she had no idea who he was. And he liked the thought of that.

“We have identified a member of the opposition,” she continued. “The mercenaries overseer is the ‘pet project’ or one of the Hutts running Makeb. He’s an alien whiphid, trained from the time he was a cub to be a Hutt Cartel enforcer. Big and brutal; thought you should know.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Jhonnen said. He lowered his hand. “We’re hitting the hook next.”

Vette nodded. “Anything special I should know?”

“Start from the bottom and work our way up.”

“Simple.” Vette gave an approving nod. “I like it.”

“Ready to meet our new friends?” Jhonnen asked as he bent over the console to send the all-clear to the team’s shuttle.

“Nothing like new Imperials to make a place feel like home,” Vette said, perhaps a touch bitterly. He couldn’t blame her. One look at the pair of them and the assumptions would start flying. Not a one of those assumptions would be that they were best friends. They would assume that she was his slave. They would assume that they were fucking. And the unspoken assumption that would fly around the room would be that they were fucking because she was his slave.

Because why would she choose to be around him if she wasn’t being forced?

He tapped out the all clear and folded his arms over his chest, waiting for the shuttle to dock.

The support team consisted of a serious looking human woman, a cathar in imperial garb (weird), a handful of troopers and a very attractive male pureblood sith.

“Take positions,” said the woman. “Bedareux, scan the base. Captain Hanthor—you’re on comms.” She turned to look at Jhonnen and balked. “My lord.” She put a hand on her chest and gave a very low bow. “My lord Wrath. I didn’t realize they were sending—sorry if I seemed… casual.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “It’s fine.” Anonymity couldn’t last.

“Sir,” said the cathar from the comms. “The Hutts are calling, but we have what we need to fake a response. What answer should I send?”

Jhonnen frowned. “Shielding failure. We’ve got rising radiation levels, but we have it under control, but we’ve got to quarantine the hook.”

“Do it,” said the woman. She turned back to Jhonnen. “I’m Katha Niar, by the way. Eight years Ministry of Logistics, three months black-ops coordinator,” she shrugged “times being what they
The sith beside her gave a stiff bow, his eyes never leaving Jhonnen’s face. “Lord Cytharat. Tactical advisor. My life for you, my loyalty to the Empire.” He had a rich, deep voice. Jhonnen smiled briefly and automatically.

“I’m here to organize the team and facilitate your needs,” said Niar. “He’ll suggest people to kill.”

Jhonnen cleared his throat and nodded. “You know who I am, though for expediency just refer to me as Jhonnen. I don’t care if it’s unreasonably casual, it’s faster. This is Vette, my right hand.”

Vette gave a small wave.

“Who’s your master?” Jhonnen asked Cytharat. “Just so it doesn’t surprise me later.”

Cytharat stood a little more stiffly. “The traitor Darth Malgus brought me out of the academy. I am here to pay for his crimes; the Empire must be united.”

“Good to know,” Jhonnen wondered where Cytharat stood on this ‘bringing aliens into the Empire’ thing because that would tell him if he was going to have a problem regarding Vette. But there wasn’t really a way to ask that.

Niar cleared her throat. “If we’re going to steal Makeb’s isotope-5 stockpile, we don’t have much time. Once the Hutts figure out what we’re after, they’ll shut down our escape route.”

Cytharat nodded. “Fleets burn over Balmorra to buy us this opportunity. We mustn’t waste it.”

“Agreed,” Jhonnen said. “Where should we begin?”

Niar pushed a button and a holo of a female zabrak with Republic markings appeared over the holomap. “Our proposed target is Solida Hesk. Mining corporation executive; secretly worked with the Hutts to study isotope-5 and sell out the planet. She’s hosting half a dozen Hutts and their bodyguards at her private resort—but if there’s anyone who knows where the isotope is stored, it’s her.”

“Vette, contact Captain Quinn and get him here, he’ll work alongside the support team. Niar knows the op, Quinn knows my tactics.”

“Yes, my lord.” Vette gave a small bow that almost certainly made her as uncomfortable as it made him.

Jhonnen looked at Cytharat. “What do you suggest?”

“It might take a better man than I to impress you, but I shall do what I can,” Cytharat said.

Niar rolled her eyes. “Can we continue?”

Jhonnen frowned at her, Cytharat was just being a little dramatic, it wasn’t out of character for a Sith lord.

Cytharat nodded. “A covert assault on Solida Hesk’s estate would take the Hutts by surprise. I can provide tactical data once you arrive.”

“Work closely with Captain Quinn when he arrives,” Jhonnen instructed. “He’s been with me for years and his tactics are always sound.”
“Yes, Lord Wrath.”

“Transportation will be ready soon,” said Niar. “You can break in, question her, and get her to turn over control of the corporate computers. Any words to your team before you go?”

Jhonnen blinked. “I’m not normally one for speeches.” He wasn’t going to admit that he tended to trip over them. “Once Vette is ready, we’ll head out.”

“Of course, my lord,” Niar bowed her head respectfully.

Vette came back over and gave a stiff little bow. “Quinn’s on his way, my lord.”

“Good,” Jhonnen exhaled through his nose. He headed down the turbolift, Vette at his side, and headed down to the loading ring. The troops that had arrived with Niar and Cytharat had cleared the ring of hostiles and Vette and Jhonnen waited in the sunshine for their transportation to get set up.

“My lord,” Quinn said in Jhonnen’s ear. “I’ve made contact with Katha Niar and am ready to get to work.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jhonnen gave a small smile. “I always feel better with you watching my back.”

“Understood my lord.”
Jhonnen returned to Niar, Cytharat, and Quinn shortly after securing Avesta’s little rebellion as a smokescreen for what they were actually doing. But at least the rebellion’s tactics were sound. There was a good chance the civilians could stand up to the Regulators, and Jhonnen tried to feel better about that.

The fighting would give them a few hours to get into the Stronghold.

The Stronghold that was in a volcanic mesa.

The plan was to simulate a groundquake to take out at least some of the security.

Jhonnen would get in and then Cytharat would hold the door for their escape. Inside, Jhonnen would fight through security, find the isotope, and get the fuck out.

It sounded simple enough.

Jhonnen did not trust it.

He and Vette had a light snack with Quinn, touching base, and then Jhonnen and Vette left the gravity hook for Stronghold One.

“Simulating a groundquake to mask our presence and breaking into a volcano base,” Vette said as they traveled. “It’s never boring with you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Boring would singe my lekku less.”

“I promise, we’ll do something nice when we’re done here.”

They landed and walked, weapons drawn, into the cave system that hid the Stronghold. Jhonnen flipped into a small pack of exoboars and cut them down before proceeding. He stayed in front of Vette but close to her, all the better to cut a swath through the wildlife without risking something coming up from behind and savaging Vette while Jhonnen hurried back to her.

It was stiflingly hot, the air hurt to breathe.

“Phew,” said Vette, wiping the sweat off her brow. “Nice sauna. Wonder how much weight a Hutt would lose locked down here.”

Jhonnen cracked a smile. He drew in a breath and began to circulate the Force around him and Vette like an air conditioning unit.

“Thanks,” she offered.
“No idea how long I can hold this,” Jhonnen said. “It might wear off the next time I get in a fight.”

“It’s nice anyway. I feel like I can actually breathe.”

The deeper they went, the hotter it got. Jhonnen focused his efforts through the Force on Vette.

Vette touched his arm. “If you collapse of heat exhaustion, neither of us can get out of here,” she reminded him. Jhonnen nodded and switched his focus back to a more even spread. They came to a small ledge they had to jump, and that wouldn’t have been an issue except for the magma at the bottom.

Jhonnen jumped first and turned. Vette took a running start and leapt, landing in Jhonnen’s arms. He squeezed her and then turned back around to set the last set of charges and opened a small portable holoterinal. Niar told him succinctly that the groundquake was set to go off and that he’d need to take shelter ‘somewhere’. She then helpfully suggested that the nearby Regulator landing port was structurally sound enough to survive the blast.

Vette and Jhonnen headed that way, following a path up out of the volcanic cave to a mesa. They took in a deep breath of air each, and turned their attention to the Regulators guarding the mouth of the cave.

Vette shot the first one to move in the throat. She frowned a little.

“Nice shot,” Jhonnen praised blocking returning fire with his lightsaber.

“I was aiming for his head.”

“It worked and that’s what matters,” Jhonnen threw himself spinning into the remaining Regulators and then wrapped the Force like a cloak around himself and Vette so they could sneak past to the bunker where they’d be safe from the groundquake.

“This is ground team to support,” Jhonnen said, flicking on his comm. “Preparing to detonate charges.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Are you safe, my lord?” Quinn asked.

“Yeah, we’re cuddled up in a bunker.” Jhonnen said. “Detonating now.”

The mesa shook. Vette curled a hand around his vest and tucked her head against his shoulder. Jhonnen curled her close as the world shuddered.

And then the shuddering stopped. Jhonnen cleared his throat. “Did it work?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Quinn in his ear. “Reports indicate that Stronghold One’s first tier security protocols are nonfunctional.”

Jhonnen did not let go of Vette and Vette didn’t let go of him.

“There’s a general alarm going out,” Quinn continued, “but that appears to be standard for a groundquake of this size.”

“And the stronghold won’t be getting reinforcements while the Hutts are putting down the revolt. You’re clear to go inside,” said Niar.
“Anything we should be expecting?”

“Sending the blueprints now,” Niar said, Jhonnen’s data pad came to life. “We know the place is full of Regulator and Hutt Cartel specialists, but we’re light on details. Lord Cytharat’s team will follow you in and hold the upper levels open. Good luck.”

Jhonnen clicked his comm off. “We should get moving.”

Vette, her head tucked into his neck said, “Are you sure the quakes have stopped?”

Jhonnen huffed a very small laugh and curled his arms more tightly around her. “I don’t know, maybe we should wait a little longer to be sure.”

After a few minutes, they pulled away from one another and exited the bunker in silence. They hurried to the entrance of Stronghold One like they were making up for wasted time. The important part was that they beat Cytharat’s team.

Which they did. The entrance was back in the volcano and a light bridge that expanded over a lake of magma was the only way in.

Vette took a deep breath. “Stay calm, Vette,” she commanded. “One foot in front of the other. It’s not like there’s a giant lake of fire right below you.”

Jhonnen holstered his right lightsaber and extended a hand to her.

Vette muttered a quiet thanks as her palm kissed his.

They sprinted across the lightbridge. Jhonnen was reminded of sprinting after Kira when they’d done something foolish and brave and had to clear out. Kira was always a step ahead, leading the way.

Vette sprinted at his side.

“Support to ground team,” Niar said in his ear. He flicked his comm on. “The Main security office is nearby; if you take control, you can open the lower levels.”

“Got it,” Jhonnen replied.

Cytharat and his small team joined them in the second floor control room. He unignited his red lightsaber and clipped it to his silver robes. “Mighty Wrath,” he said warmly.

Jhonnen inclined his head and smiled a little bit. “Hey, welcome to the party.”

Cytharat’s mouth twitched. “With your leave, we will hold position here. No one will pursue you. No one will close off your escape route.”

Jhonnen nodded. “You can relax a little, we’re very much in this together.”

Cytharat tilted his head with some interest. “Say the word, and I will be at your side.”

“My lord,” interrupted one of Cytharat’s men. “I’ll start trying to access the security controls—maybe we can link them to the gravity hook.”

Cytharat nodded. “Begin.” He turned his attention back to Jhonnen, meeting Jhonnen’s eyes and then looking down a little but not all the way to the floor and then back to Jhonnen’s eyes. “If we
can bring Stronghold One under your control, perhaps it will be of use. We shall await your word.”

“We’ll get this done as fast as we can,” Jhonnen promised. “Hold tight.”

Vette followed him out of the operations room and deeper into Stronghold One.

They reached the central vault without any trouble, just a few Regulators in their way.


“Our science officer believes that the radiation levels indicate the Hutts’ isotope-5 prototype droid is active.”

“Gee,” Jhonnen said, “that’ll be fun. How do I kill it?”

Quinn stroked his chin in thought and then nodded, folding his arms professionally behind his back. “I believe, my lord, that you should be able to reprogram Stronghold One’s defenses. Their firepower, combined with precise strikes from your lightsabers, should bring the droid down. I suggest you have Vette keep the droid’s attention.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jhonnen said. “Transfer the data I need to shove into the computers and work with Cytharat to target the droid.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Thanks.” He hung up and tucked the portable terminal back into a pocket. He looked at Vette. “Do not try and ‘get the thing’s’ attention, alright?”

“I was going to protest that part of Quinn’s plan anyway,” Vette said.

The door opened as Jhonnen drew his lightsabers. The droid, a large quadruped with wiggly eye-sensors, waited for him to approach and make himself a threat. Jhonnen handed Vette the dataspike Quinn should have transferred the override too. “I’ll get its attention, you get the guns online.”

“Got it,” Vette said. “Be careful.”

“Eh…” Jhonnen shrugged. “I mean, I won’t be.” And before Vette could protest he leapt face-first into the droid, slashing with both lightsabers. They bounced off the droid’s body, the metal clearly a cortosis alloy. Jhonnen landed on his feet, skidding backwards. He held the droids attention, forced to dodge more than parry, while Vette got the guns online.

Once the guns were up he rolled behind one of the pillars to catch his breath.

“How’re you doing?” He shouted over the gunfire, unable to help but wish Vette was Force sensitive because then he could just reach out and check on her.

“I’ve got an idea!” Vette shouted excitedly. “Go get its attention!”

Jhonnen nodded to himself and then rolled out of cover to get the droid’s attention, chucking one lightsaber and managing to knock off one of the wriggly eye-sensors.

Jhonnen’s danger sense pinged and he leapt backwards out of the way as *Hutt-fucking lava* poured from the ceiling to douse the droid. Vette shouted with alarm and Jhonnen looked up to find her, watching her run away from a small horde of lesser droids. He flung himself up into the droids and
cut through them while Vette fired over his shoulder.

They looked at one another as the last droid stopped twitching and exchanged a very small smile before hurrying to the turbo lift on the other side of the room.

The turbolift took them down to the vault. Jhonnen tensed as the door opened, ready for a fight.

A fight was not forthcoming.

He and Vette stepped carefully out of the lift. And Jhonnen started looking around for the isotope-5 storage tanks, spotting them when Vette caught his arm and pointed. They made their way over to the solitary canister.

Jhonnen sucked on his eyetooth and turned his comm on. “So… I found where they had been keeping the isotope.”

“What do you mean had been?” asked Niar, a little sharply.

“I found storage tanks, but they’re mostly empty; there’s only one sample here.”

“That can’t be right. Keep looking.”

“Alright,” Jhonnen shrugged. “Maybe they moved them.” He proceeded further into the vault, Vette just a step behind him.

“My lord,” Quinn said. “Radiation levels are rising in the area where you are. I’m identifying over two dozen power signatures very similar to the prototype droid you just fought.”

“Marr probably had specific plans for the isotope and would not be satisfied with an army.” Jhonnen sighed. “Any thoughts on a next step?”

“Look, you have a sample. Get out of there before those things activate,” said Niar.

Jhonnen nodded and went to tell Vette when movement in the dark attracted his eye.

“Shit,” Vette swore as one of the droids started to move. Its eyes flickered and a hologram flickered in the dark and a hutt appeared. Jhonnen narrowed his eyes.

“Please, stay,” said the Hutt. He was speaking basic, something mostly unprecedented. Hutts stuck to Huttese because it made them feel superior. “I am Szajin, First Archon of the New Hutt Empire and shadow chief of the conquest-world Makeb. I’d been wondering about the Empire’s presence here for some time—but of course you wanted the isotope.”

“You’ve damaged the integrity of a planet,” Jhonnen snapped. “Makeb is tearing itself apart.”

“That does not concern me,” replied the Archon. “The only isotope-5 left on Makeb is locked in the planet’s core—and when that explodes, there won’t be any left at all. Our army of droids is being assembled at facilities across the planet. Your Empire is has nothing—rumor is, even your Emperor is missing.”

“That’s really not my problem,” Jhonnen said defiantly.

“Silly little boy,” the Archon clicked his tongue. “Now let us see how many droids it takes to eliminate you. More than one, I wager—but not many.”

The hologram flickered away.
In his ear, Jhonnen heard Lord Cytharat. “There are reinforcements coming—we’re under attack.”

“Hold on!” Jhonnen ordered. He deflected a laser burst with his lightsabers and chuckled the right saber at the droid, looping it around and pulling it through the machine’s neck. It got stuck but that was proof of concept that these little ones didn’t have the same cortosis plating that had slowed him down on the big one. “Target the joints!” He shouted at Vette. Dashing forward and leaping up to the thing’s face. Amplifying his strength with the Force, Jhonnen ripped out the ocular targeting so it couldn’t lock onto Vette and then kicked the lightsaber in its neck until it punched through.

He landed on his ass as the thing fell over.

Vette offered him a hand up as more lights came on.

<< Program “Termination” = online >>

“Run.” Jhonnen summoned both lightsabers to his grip. “Just run.”

He and Vette darted out of the vault.

They came up behind some Regulator troops and caught them by surprise, carving through them back into the security center. Cytharat’s team has been hit hard, there were two remaining troopers and one of them was injured, but they’d held off a much larger force. Jhonnen looked around and then looked up at Cytharat.

Cytharat tried to salute and teetered to the side, spurring Jhonnen to move to catch him. “Are you alright?”

Cytharat’s silver robes were rusty with blood and he leaned heavily into Jhonnen’s arms. One of Cytharat’s hands curled around the back of Jhonnen’s neck and he tilted his head back so their lips met. The sensation was, not unpleasant, but strange. Jhonnen knew from touching his own lips when they’d been cut or bruised, how sensitive the skin could be. It was quite another thing to feel it.

Cytharat pulled back. “Forgive me, my lord.”

“No,” Jhonnen said, cheeks going purple. “No you’re fine. That was… that was nice. Uh, thank you.”

“For that alone, I would have come to Makeb.”

Vette snorted and Jhonnen was suddenly very self-conscious. He cleared his throat. “We need to move now, before reinforcements come.”

He helped Cytharat to standing and sent him and his remaining troopers out first, bringing up the rear with Vette.

“Are you alright?” he asked in a low voice once he was certain no one could hear them.

Vette looked at him like he’d asked a stupid question and then dropped her shoulders with resignation. “I’m fine,” she said. “How was your first kiss?”

“Fine?” Jhonnen answered. “It was nice, I may seek out further kisses eventually. I mean, no hurry, but yeah.”
She shook her head and snorted a laugh. “You're hopeless.”

He smiled at her. “Yeah, probably.”

They returned to the gravity hook with nothing to show for it. Jhonnen saw to it that the wounded were packed on a ship and taken to Dromund Kaas before returning to Katha Niar and Quinn in the command center.

Katha Niar was in the middle of a holocall with Darth Marr when they got back. It would have been inaccurate to say that Darth Marr looked annoyed. Marr looked the way he always deed with was stoic and frightening. However, Marr was talking and it was pretty clear that he was annoyed, ragging on Niar.

“The Hutts are aware of your presence and the isotope-5 is gone,” Marr said angrily. His hands were planted on his hips, like he was daring her to contradict his analysis.

“Yes, my lord.” Niar dropped her chin, staring at the floor in distress. “We have a sample, and there’s more in the core, but… I failed.”

“Today, three planets fell to Republic butchers,” Marr growled. “I sacrificed those worlds and the legions defending them in order to buy time for this operation to succeed. “You are responsible for what happens on Makeb.” He pointed at Jhonnen.

Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest, refusing to be cowed. “Hey,” he said with a frown. “The Hutts have clearly been building these droids for a while. There wasn’t any isotope-5 when we landed but there’s still isotope in the core. We’ll get it.”

Jhonnen hated masks. He liked to read people’s faces and gauge where they were at and what they were thinking. Preventing this was almost certainly the reason people like Baras and Marr kept their faces hidden. But still, he hated it.

“You will deal with the situation at hand.”

Oh, will I? Jhonnen thought mutinously. He had enough sense not to say anything though.

“We have a chance to forge a new Empire,” Marr said determinedly. “An Empire united in loyalty and passion, not simplistic dedication to an unseen Emperor. But fail to procure the isotope-5 and the Empire dies forever. Solve this.”

The channel went silent and Jhonnen couldn’t help but think about the last time someone had wanted to forge a new Empire. Malgus was dead. Very, exceptionally, dead. He knew, he had been largely responsible. Him and the Hero of Tython.

And Kira…

“My lord?” Vette said grabbing his attention.

“Sorry,” Jhonnen turned to face Niar, Quinn and the nemoridian scientist Nadrin.

<< We have been analyzing options, and our conclusion is unfortunate: we cannot extract the isotope-5 from the droids. >>

“Well,” said Jhonnen, “Nothing is ever easy.”

“We can’t mine the isotope ourselves before the planet explodes,” said Niar. “Even if the Hutts
cooperated, we’d never get enough.”

“Is there another way to get it?” Jhonnen asked.

<< Makeb is the only known source of the isotope. The conditions under which it forms appear unique to the planet’s core. >>

That didn’t… sound right, but granted, Jhonnen didn’t know enough about astro-geology, or even those two things separately to really be certain. Most of his education had centered on murder.

“So we’re back at the start. Without Makeb, there is no isotope-5,” mourned Niar.

“Then the only thing to do is save the planet,” Quinn volunteered.

“Can we do that?” Jhonnen asked, looking at Nadrin.

<< Saving a planet would require significant… innovation. I can make no promises. >>

“Just give me what you can and rope the science bureau in if you need to. This is priority one. We need to figure something out or Marr will get tetchier than usual.”

And Marr, like most Dark Council members, was usually pretty tetchy.

Jhonnen hated the Dark Council. He hated the schemes, he hated the power plays and he hated that Marr couldn’t just leave him alone and had roped him into this banthashit.

“What should the rest of us do?” asked Quinn.

Jhonnen folded his hands in front of him because hooking his thumbs in his belt loops would have been decidedly unsith-y. “Quinn, I want you to organize security details and find people to assist Niar in going through Solida Hesk’s data. It was a mining company, right? That means it’ll have information about the planet’s geology. I’ll be on my ship, meditating on the dark side until you have something for me to do.”

“My lord,” Quinn and Niar bowed.

Jhonnen turned on his heel and stalked towards the umbilical where the *Tide* was once again safely hitched, Vette at his side.

“Meditating on the dark side, huh?” she said as the passed into his room.

“I should probably actually do that,” Jhonnen said, “but I might just take a nap.”

“Aren’t you worried about losing condition?” Vette asked, settling on the edge of the bed and undoing her boots.

Jhonnen paused to consider. “I haven’t been dwelling on my hate the way I used to. I focus on passion instead, occasionally rage but… there’s been less of that too.”

“Huh,” Vette flopped over onto the bed and Jhonnen smiled and joined her, craving the way she curled around him. “Why’s that?”

“You know why.” Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “You know exactly why.”

Vette grinned. “I am awesome, aren’t I?”
“Yes,” Jhonnen agreed, closing his eyes, “Yes you are.”

Drifting into an in-between space, Jhonnen reached for Kira on the planet’s surface. He found the threads of her force-signature, as radiant and as familiar as when they’d been kids.

*Kira?*

**Jhonnen? What are you doing on Makeb?**

There was no way to lie through a force bond.

*I can’t tell you, but I’m not here to hurt anyone.*

She was quiet for a moment. He felt hot indignation and betrayal. Then it softened and all there was was hurt.

**How’ve you been?**

*Being a sith is pretty much the worst. There’s backstabbing and scheming that I want nothing to do with. My father was proud enough of me that it wasn’t even satisfying to kill him.*

**You finally killed him?**

*Yeah. Mom’s been avenged. I just wish it had felt better.*

**Kat helped me get the Emperor out of my head.**

*The Emperor was in your head?*

**I didn’t tell you everything. I was scared you’d run away.**

*I would never have left you willingly.*

Warmth flooded the Force bond

*But, yeah, lately I’ve been alright. I have a good friend and you should know how much that counts for.*

**The pretty twi’lek, right?**

*Yeah, she’s really something. I love her.*

*But…*

*Kira… I miss you. A lot.*

A wave of bitterness rolled through their bond before it mellowed into something that was just a little bit sad.

*I miss you too.*

*I keep thinking about Ilum.*

*I asked you to come with me.*
I know. And you have no idea how desperately I wanted to say yes.

I would give various limbs for things to be how they were when we were kids.

But I’ve got people who rely on me, people who won’t leave the Empire and will be strung up if I leave.

It’s not because I don’t love you.

A long pause.

You love me?

I always have. Probably always will.

But I love Vette too, I couldn’t… I won’t leave her behind. I won’t let anything separate us the way you and I were separated. I have the power to protect what’s precious to me now.

I love you too.

Heartbreak rippled through their bond, and Jhonnen knew that they were crying together. He reached out like he was smoothing her hair and felt the ghost of her fingers on his cheeks. Her Force signature pressed against his. Her forehead to his. Her lips to his. Her soul to his.

I have to get up now. Try not to get yourself killed and if you need an out, I’ll come for you.

Take care of yourself, stay safe.

“Jhonnen?”

He opened his eyes and felt fingers brush over a wetness on his cheeks.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Jhonnen cleared his throat. “I was just… I guess I was saying goodbye.”

“Kira?”

He nodded,

Vette set her cheek against his collar bone and he held her tightly with the arm she was lying on.

“Vette?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for being here. For being wonderful.”

Jhonnen and his team attempt to save the planet Makeb

Jhonnen showered and pulled his hair into a short ponytail before joining Vette in the lounge of *The Sanguine Tide* and heading back to the gravity hook command center together. Quinn looked up from what he was doing and saluted before he called Niar and Nadrin over to present their findings.

It was strange not seeing Cytharat in the room; he’d been evacuated back to Dromund Kaas. Jhonnen wondered if he would miss Cytharat or not.

Probably not. They’d only known each other for a couple of days, kissing notwithstanding.

“If I may, my lord,” said Niar. “They’re making progress, but even if we save Makeb, the timing… If the Hutts realize the planet’s not about to blow, they’ll never leave willingly. We can’t afford a ground war, we still need them to evacuate.”

Jhonnen nodded. “So information control needs to be one of our top priorities. Quinn, make that your job.”

“My lord,” Quinn bowed his head.

<< Forgive my interruption, >> said Nadrin. << We are ready to present. >> He accessed the holoterminal and two people appeared.

“Taris Engineering Post here. Stabilizing Makeb’s core is *theoretically* possible, but we don’t have enough data.”

The other scientist nodded. “Quesh Geo-survey Station. We need to induce the isotope-5 inside Makeb to release an energy pulse, allowing us to map all of its deposits.”

<< To perform this invaluable experiment, however, >> said Nadrin. << You would need to travel underground to the core of the planet. We recognize the inconvenience. >>

“Nothing about this is convenient,” Jhonnen said with a small sigh. “How do I get to the core?”

“If we do this…” Niar said thoughtfully. “Our best access point is the laser drill shaft where the isotope-5 was originally discovered. The shaft runs kilometers under a mining station, and it’s been abandoned—so probably treacherous, but less chance of Hutt interference.”

“We need to do this quickly,” Jhonnen said.

<< We will provide all necessary equipment, >> Nadrin promised. << And speak once you arrive on site. >>

Well, obviously.

Once they were out of the command center and Jhonnen had a backpack with the equipment they needed, Vette spoke up.

“Kinda weird that the Empire’s trying to save a planet,” she said.

Jhonnen nodded. “You’re right about that.”

“So we’re headed to the core. It’s occurred to you how insane that is, right?”

“Yep. But we don’t have much of a say in the matter.”

The mining platform was crawling with animal life. Jhonnen and Vette drew their weapons and proceeded carefully to the abandoned holoterminal. Vette produced some tools from her pockets and opened a side panel, rewiring a couple of things so the terminal flickered back to life.

“You’re brilliant,” Jhonnen praised. He dialed the frequency for the gravity hook. “We’re here.”

“Position confirmed,” said Niar, standing next to Nadrin.

<< You have, perhaps, reached a maintenance station? The accompanying mine shaft should lead nearly to the planet’s core. Once you are deep enough, you might induce the core’s isotope-5 deposits to release a radiation burst. That would allow us to determine the core’s status.”

“Neat,” said Jhonnen.

“I’ve been going through the mine site blueprints—I’ll copy you on the data—and it looks like the machinery is offline.” Niar frowned. “You’ll want to flip the back-up generators, get power to the turbolifts and locks but there are… life-forms down there. Big ones.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Jhonnen promised.

Turning off the holoterminal, Jhonnen looked down at the network of catwalks.

“I ever tell you I have a fear of falling to my death?” Vette asked dryly.

“I ever tell you I have a fear of you falling to your death?” Jhonnen replied. “I’ll catch you.”

She smiled at him and they set about clearing the catwalks and accessing the generators to restore power to the drill site. Then they took a turbolift down to the mine shaft itself, braced to enter the core.

But the mine shaft was capped.

“Motherfucker,” Jhonnen complained, kicking the door with the toe of his boot. “Now what?”

“Lemme see those blueprints.” Vette said.

Jhonnen handed her his datapad.

She hummed, fingers sliding the blueprints around and then handed the datapad back. “There’s a maintenance shaft over there,” she pointed off to the left. “We should be able to get in that way.”

Jhonnen grinned at her. “You’re—”
“Brilliant?” she headed him off. “I know.” She grinned. “Come on, let’s run this stupid experiment and get this over with.”

They took the lift for the maintenance shaft and emerged far below the planet’s surface. Surprisingly, there was light, in filtered in from the massive hole the mining laser had cut into the planet. Jhonnen reached out with the force and felt the other life forms. Slowly, he and Vette advanced, cutting down creatures as they went until they reached the mining equipment terminals and Vette set about turning the holoterminal on so Nadrin could tell them exactly what they were supposed to do with the stuff in Jhonnen’s pack.

“We’re here,” Jhonnen said.

“Acknowledged,” said Niar over the holo. “Signal when you’ve unloaded the equipment.”

Jhonnen followed the instructions he’d been given and set the equipment up near the edge of the hole the laser had carved.

<< This is Nadrin. All systems functioning within acceptable parameters. Please be advised that the primary inductor array will take several minutes to fully charge.”

“Cool,” Jhonnen said, careful not to roll his eyes. He wanted this over with, the cavern they were in was creepy and more beasts kept falling from the ceiling, drawn to the equipment.

Jhonnen and Vette battled the beasts until the equipment beeped and Jhonnen jogged back to the mining console to contact Nadrin and Niar, Vette keeping her blasters draw to defend them if anything else happened.

“Is it ready?” Jhonnen asked.

“One hundred percent and holding,” replied Niar. “Ready when you are.”

Nadrin nodded. “The radiation pulse from Makeb’s core should be harmless, however you may wish to shield your eyes.

Jhonnen closed his eyes and braced, a huge gust of wind battered him and then died.

<< Receiving data, >> said Nadrin as Jhonnen opened his eyes. << Mapping locations of isotope-5 deposits. >>

The mine shaft rumbled. Vette touched Jhonnen’s arm.

“Nadrin?” said Niar. “What is that?”

<< Unexpected. The pulse has caused a minute shift in isotope-5 energy levels: a minor groundquake is imminent. >>

Jhonnen, who was underground, was not thrilled to hear that. He looked over to Vette. “We’ve gotta go. Now.”

“Jhonny… We’ll never reach the exit in time,” Vette said, fear lancing uncharacteristically through her voice as her grip on his arm tightened.

“There’s an emergency shelter near the cavern entrance,” said Niar. “Go!”

Jhonnen and Vette tore through the mine shaft, pushing their legs to the limit. Jhonnen threw himself into the shelter and turned, wrapping the Force around Vette and jerking her into the
shelter as the tremor hit.

He wrapped his arms around her and took a deep breath to steady himself.

“Thanks,” Vette said. “Never been so relieved to feel like a rag doll.”

“Sorry about that,” he rested his head on her shoulder and Vette set her cheek against his temple.

They parted and Vette turned on the light on her vest so they had at least a little illumination.

“Well,” Vette said. “We survived the groundquake. Now we’ve just got starvation to look forward to.”

Jhonnen snorted. “Not if I can help it.”

Lightsabers, after all, were just plasma cutters, and Jhonnen had two of them.

He ignited them and started carving through the rock, using the Force to clear away the rubble he made.

It was slow going, slow enough that Jhonnen began to worry they were going to run out of air.

“I’m sorry,” Vette said while they walked.

“What for?”

“I used your name in front of people.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “You’re not my slave and it’s my name. I don’t expect you to call me Darth Volens, I don’t want you to call me Darth Volens.” He didn’t want anyone to call him Darth Volens it was a phenomenally stupid name, even as far as Sith names went.

“They’ll think I’m your weak spot.”

Jhonnen turned around. “Vette, you are my weak spot. You’re also like, my greatest strength. It’s fine, I promise you, it’s fine.”

He turned back around and resumed carving their way out of the cave-in.

Daylight stung their eyes as they escaped the cave-in. Katha Niar and a team were waiting, clearly in the middle of some rescue op. Niar’s eyes slid from Jhonnen to Vette, her lips pursed curiously.

Jhonnen cleared his throat, redirecting her gaze back onto him.

“My lord,” she said. “Forgive us for not coming sooner.”


“We came in as soon as those creatures cleared out. Set up a base camp on the mining platform. We got the data, though. Nadrin and the others, they think they can save Makeb.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Good. Good. We should talk on the mining platform.”

Niar nodded and Jhonnen and Vette made their way to the evac shuttle, piling in and sitting next to each other.
Niar watched them carefully.

“Just ask.” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest.

“My lord, I just wasn’t expected your slave to be so—”

“She isn’t my slave,” Jhonnen growled. “Vette is an independent contractor who works for me. She’s not my slave, Quinn’s not my slave. I have no slaves.”

“I… see, my lord. I apologize for the misunderstanding.”

“Speaking of Quinn,” Vette looked around. “Where is he?”

“He said that he’d been assigned to information control and that he wasn’t going to let you down. He seemed convinced you’d be alright.”

Jhonnen was exceedingly touched by this and he knew it was obvious on his face. The rest of the flight to the mining platform was quiet. When they arrived, Vette went to get something to eat and Jhonnen followed Niar into the new command center.

Quinn saluted as Jhonnen entered, then went back to monitoring the comms, assisting Captain Hanthor with information control.

“Attention, everyone!” announced Niar. “Briefing begins now!”

<< Mighty and fearsome lord, >> Nadrin bowed.

Jhonnen avoided rolling his eyes, because, yeah, right.

<< I am pleased to state that your experiment proved fruitful. Research continues, but we believe we can stabilize Makeb’s core by using the planet’s mining lasers to reshape the isotope-5 deposits. >>

“So what do we do next?” Jhonnen asked.

<< We continue to finalize details. However, we will require a crew capable of controlling multiple mining platforms. >>

“Problem is,” said Niar. “Our team can barely operate these wretched things. We need experts—engineers and supervisors who can run the mining lasers under our command.”

“So… locals?” Jhonnen asked.

Niar nodded. “That’s the trouble. Watch.”

She pushed a button and the Archon appeared on the holoterminal.

“This is the Archon to Phobium Squad Command. The Imperial forces are desperate, and I believe they intend to mine what isotope-5 they can before the core erupts. But the Imperials will need assistance. Have your men place all engineers of level seven and above under protective custody.”

Niar pushed another button and the Archon vanished. “He’s wrong about our goal,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter. The Archon’s got black ops mercs kidnapping the people we need.”

“On the other hand, it means the Archon is doing the heavy lifting of finding those people.”
“My lord,” said Quinn. “Phobium Squad is a secret team of Regulator mercenaries, bought off by
the Hutts with cybernetics. It’s likely they’re holding the engineers in groundquake shelters, do to
their defensibility.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen nodded to Quinn.

“A few engineering chiefs who escaped joined a Republic refugee caravan,” said Niar. “Won’t be
long before Phobium Squad catches them too.”

“Send me the coordinates and I’ll go get the engineers we need.”

“One more thing,” Niar cleared her throat. “We’re still decrypting the order, but it looks like the
Archon sent an isotope-5 droid to help secure the caravan. Just to make things difficult.”

“I’ve never been a fan of Hutts,” Jhonnen said dryly. “But this Archon is the frosting on the cake.”

“We’ll be in touch from here,” Niar assured him. “Anything you need, let us know.”

Jhonnen nodded and left the command center, finding Vette on the outer ring of of the mining
platform snacking on a protein bar. She looked up when his shadow fell over her and offered him
the still wrapped bar that was sitting on her lap.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She swallowed. “So what’s our next step?”

“Kidnapping engineers.” Jhonnen unwrapped the bar. “I’ll explain on the flight over.”

Phobium squad was good. Jhonnen started out by sticking close to Vette and deflecting blaster
bolts before abruptly leaping forward and landing in the middle of the squad around the first
groundquake shelter, carving them to bits.

Warmth flooded his brain. Kira was close.

He rescued the engineers in the quake shelters, scarcely paying attention to his surroundings and
then raced to the caravan, Vette catching his arm.

“What is it?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Jhonnen shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong. I just… Kira’s close. We need to get this
finished before she and her Jedi friend swoop in.”

Their way was blocked with rubble, but Vette planted a handful of grenades at the base and blew it
away. Jhonnen and Vette charged out, ready to face the isotope-5 droid, only to find it a pile of
rubble with Kira and Katsulas, the Hero of Tython, standing over it.

Jhonnen took a deep breath and walked forward.

The two jedi turned to acknowledge him, Kira’s eyes widening somewhat.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, preempting her companion from asking the same question.

“There are a couple of engineers in your caravan,” Jhonnen said. “I need them.”

Katsulas narrowed his eyes. “I’m not about to just let the Empire kidnap these people.”
Jhonnen gave Kira a pleading look. “I have nothing but the best of intentions.”

“Which are?” Katsulas challenged, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s… look, just let me talk to them and we can let them decide.”

Katsulas considered. “I’m not going to let you talk to them in private,” he said. “I know how Sith can be.”

Jhonnen looked offended and then sighed, letting his shoulders slump. “That’s… fair. Actually, I also know how Sith can be. But my reasons are secret. They need to remain secret or the Hutts will never slacken their hold on Makeb.”

He just had to trust that Katsulas and Kira wouldn’t say anything. He… he wanted to trust Kira.

So he would.

Just like that.

With Katsulas at his side, to keep tabs on him, Jhonnen located the trio of engineers. “I have a plan to save Makeb but I need your help.”

They looked skeptical, but Kira spoke up. “He’s telling the truth, Kat. I can feel it when he lies.”

Katsulas looked at Kira and then back at Jhonnen and nodded. “If Kira trusts you, I trust you. The rest is up to them.”

The engineers conferred with one another and then looked back at Jhonnen. “Some hope is better than nothing.”

Jhonnen smiled. “Follow the path back, there are Imperial soldiers who will take you to safety.”

The engineers scurried off and Jhonnen turned to look at Kira and Katsulas. “Thank you.”

“You’re really going to save the planet?” Katsulas asked.

“I’m trying at any rate. The science is all a little bit over my head.” He exhaled. “Also, please keep it to yourselves. I know I have no right to ask that, but… it’s important.” He looked at Kira. “Are we enemies now?”

She took a breath and nodded. “You’re Sith.”

That was fair. Kira had always hated the Sith. It was stupid to think she’d make an exception for him. He wanted to tell her that he’d meant everything she’d felt during their communion.

But she knew.

“Goodbye then.” He promised himself he wouldn’t cry.

“Bye.”

Jhonnen and Vette jogged down the road and when Jhonnen slowed his pace, Vette set a hand on his back.

“Are you alright?”
“Fine,” he lied. ”Just glad we got out of there without a fight.”

Vette didn’t say anything, but she rubbed his back a little before pulling away as they caught up with the Imperial forces to return to the mining platform.

Jhonnen was quiet, trying not to stare at his boots in despondency because a) he couldn’t afford to have anything think he was weak and b) it really shouldn’t have come as a surprise that he and Kira were enemies now. It shouldn’t have been a blow.

But it was a blow.

He loved her, she loved him.

And because of his father, because of what his father had turned him into, because of what he was, they not only couldn’t be together, they couldn’t even be friends. And that was what stung the most.

His father had won. His father had stolen Kira from him.

They docked at the mining platform. Jhonnen cleared his throat. “Vette, make my excuses to Niar and everybody. I need to use the fresher.”

Vette nodded and Jhonnen went the other direction. In the fresher he closed and locked the door before sliding down it, forehead pressed to the metal. His shoulders shook, his stomach roiled as tears dripped down his face to blanket his neck in moisture. She didn’t hate him, but it didn’t even matter.

Things would never be how they’d been when they were kids. It would never be him and Kira against the galaxy.

Jhonnen finished crying and dried his face. He left the fresher and almost walked directly into Vette. She gave him a sad smile. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

The hallway was empty, but there were eyes everywhere. He couldn’t just collapse in her arms and take solace in the one friend the galaxy would let him have.

“I’m fine,” he lied.

Vette nodded. “Niar and Quinn are ready for you.”

“Good. I’m eager to put this planet behind us.” He walked past her, heading for the command center with Vette on his heels.

“Are we all here?” asked Niar, looking to the number of holographic scientists Nadrin had called up. “With your permission, my lord, we’ll start the briefing.”

Jhonnen nodded.

Nadrin started. << After vigorous discussion the Science Bureau has reached consensus on a plan to preserve Makeb. >>

Fucking finally.

“The isotope-5 deposits in Makeb’s core generate powerful gravitational and electromagnetic fields. Until recently, those fields maintained the core’s equilibrium.”
Jhonnen understood all of those words and still felt like he didn’t understand what they were talking about.

“The, ah, rapid removal of isotope-5 caused the fields to fluctuate and destabilized the core. Now Makeb is tearing itself apart,” said one of the other scientists.

Jhonnen nodded.

<< It is now too late to reverse the destabilization process, >> explained Nadrin. << Our only hope is to accelerate it. >>

“Uh… what?” Jhonnen asked. “Won’t that just explode the planet faster?”

<< By forcing Makeb through the end stages of destabilization in a compressed time frame, the damage will be contained. >>

“There won’t be time for the mantle to fully crack before the core settles into a new state of equilibrium,” explained another scientist.

A different scientist nodded his agreement. “The acceleration won’t be easy on the planet. The groundquakes will be worse than ever, and the aftershocks will continue for months. The mesas will disintegrate, the cities will burn, and the gasses released will likely poison the atmosphere. But it’s that or total annihilation.”

“You’ll see a new Makeb,” said the first scientist. ”And when it’s over, the isotope-5 will be intact and ready for harvest.”

Jhonnen frowned. “Makeb has a population. What happens to them?”

Niar shrugged. “They’ll have a memorial, which is more than the Hutts offered.”

Jhonnen frowned more deeply but… she was right. And he didn’t like that she was right.

<< May I? >> asked Nadrin. << As we discussed earlier, the mining lasers are the key to manipulating the core. Our new engineers will operate the platforms. >>

“The timing’s perfect,” said Niar. “The whole population is fleeing the planet, so that’ll get rid of the Hutts while we work.” She frowned. “But the Archon still thinks we’re trying to mine the isotope. He’s sent his forces to blockade the laser drill platforms. All his forces.”

Jhonnen looked to Quinn. “Do you know anything about this?”

“Yes, my lord,” Quinn nodded. “We know that the first platform is protected by isotope-5 droids. The second and third seem to mostly be protected by man-power. Regulator forces and Cartel forces respectively.”

“Alright,” Jhonnen nodded. “Quinn, you’ll come with Vette and I to hit the platforms, we’ll need the extra firepower.”

“Of course, my lord.”

With Quinn and Vette following behind him, Jhonnen left the command center and headed for the shuttle that would take them to the other mining platforms.

In the safety of the shuttle, Vette reached over and touched the insider of Jhonnen’s wrist, just for a second, but the effect was grounding.
He exhaled through his nose. He could fall apart about Kira more thoroughly later. Right now he needed to be on his game because if he wasn’t someone could get killed. He wasn’t going to risk Vette or Quinn on him losing it when they were counting on him.

He was Sith.

He could handle this.

They set down near the first platform and tore through the Regulator forces protecting it, encountering the first of the isotope-5 droids when they first hit the platform.

Quinn, however, had taken notes and run simulations since Jhonnen and Vette had encountered the first isotope-5 droid and had figured out its weaknesses, following his lead, the three of them took down the droid with very little trouble. And after that the other droids were even easier.

Jhonnen gave Quinn a grateful smile and moved in to take the command center, holding it while the engineering corps moved in to start implementing Nadrin’s plan to save Makeb.

The second platform was held by Regulator forces, who, on their own, weren’t too bad if it hadn’t been for the air-support the Archon had called in. Skyfighters peppered the ground, forcing Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn into cover.

“We need to take those out,” Jhonnen said. “And skyfighters are a little out of my range.”

“My lord,” Quinn said. “It’s very likely that the Regulators came equipped with rockets. We could liberate these weapons and use them to down the enemy fighters.”

“Works for me,” Jhonnen said. “Vette, you’ll be the one actually firing them.”

“Got it,” Vette said.

They moved from cover and rushed up into the platform itself, locating a weapons cache and then heading to the outdoor platforms for Vette to take out the skyfighters. When the enemy air support was down, they headed in and took the command center.

While they were waiting for the engineering team, the platform rocked with a groundquake, causing Jhonnen to reach for Quinn and Vette to reach for Jhonnen and all three of them to use each other to remain upright.

Jhonnen contacted the support team.

<< This is Nadrin. That groundquake is the result of the first team’s drilling: expect the tremors to worsen as additional lasers come online. >>


“Yes, my lord.”

“I’m fine.”

They moved on.

The third platform went much the same, with Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn carving a bloody canyon through the cartel forces and holding the command center until the engineering corps came and took over.
Jhonnen called Niar after Quinn had finished tending to his handful of blaster burns and she sent the last engineering team. Jhonnen and his small crew took up residence in a small corner of the room as a failsafe against more cartel forces, waiting with bated breath to see if Nadrin’s plan would work.

In the back of his thoughts, Jhonnen felt Kira leave the planet’s surface.

He tried hard to believe that it would be a good thing if he never saw her again. Thinking it for even an instant hurt.

<< Running projections, >> Nadrin said over the holo. << The core will reach equilibrium shortly; Makeb will remain intact. >>

“Awesome,” Jhonnen said, stretching his arms.

The platform shook and the engineers turned to him. “Now, let us go,” said the woman in charge. “We can get offworld and never bother you again. Please.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Keep quiet about what we’ve done, but get to safety. Hurry.”

“We won’t spread it around. Thank you.”

Nadrin cleared his throat. << I will maintain control of the drills remotely as the planet stabilizes. I should be able to prevent this continent from collapsing. >>

“Well that’s something at least,” Jhonnen said dryly, not particularly looking forward to the whole “gasses might poison the atmosphere” phase of this plan and wanting to be done with it now.

“My lord!” Niar said. “Message from Darth Marr, but I’m getting interference...”

Niar and Nadrin turned into a flickering, staticy image of Darth Marr. “The Republic and Hutt fleets are abandoning the Makeb system,” Marr said through heavy distortion. “They report the planet is in its death throes.”

“Well it isn’t.” Jhonnen said. “A bit of deception on our end.”

Marr nodded. “When the last Republic and Hutt ships have fled, I will send my fleet to secure the planet. Makeb will be ours within the week. Well done, Wrath.”

Marr vanished and, after a moment, Nadrin and Niar reappeared.

<< It appears the isotope-5 fluctuations are exacerbating Makeb’s atmospheric interference. It will take some time to restore offworld communications. >>

Jhonnen shrugged. “That’s… probably a good thing, if I’m honest.”

“Agreed,” said Niar. “Could be a boon. When you’re good to travel, we can meet back here. Celebrate and sleep.”

Jhonnen didn’t feel like celebrating, still feeling the empty spot on the end of his Force bond with Kira that said she was out of range. But he could sleep for a week.

With this fiasco over with, maybe he would.

He, Vette and Quinn hurried back to the shuttle, eager to be off.
There was chaos at the mining platform when they arrived. Jhonnen narrowed his eyes in concern and stopped one of the Imperials rushing around.

“What’s happened?”

“Sir!” the Imperial saluted. “We were attacked by a cartel force. Several of our people were taken hostage, Commander Niar among them.”

“Shit,” Jhonnen said. “Quinn, help with the wounded. I’m going to see if Nadrin’s alright and if anyone knows where the Archon took our people.”

Quinn saluted and hurried off, Jhonnen and Vette headed inside and found Nadrin by the holoterminal, arguing with a technician.

<< I beg you to repair the drill controls first! >>

“Protocol says to get the alarms online.”

<< Please. Until the core settles our humble exertions are the only thing keeping this groundquakes in check. This mesa could collapse if I cannot work. >>

“Yeah,” Jhonnen said. “That’s bad. Fix the drill controls first.” He looked up when sergeant Bedareux charged in.

“Llane didn’t make it. Protison’s on one leg, but he can hold a rifle.”

“Where did they take our people?” Jhonnen asked. “We need to mount a rescue op immediately.”

People were in danger.

Also they might crack and reveal that the planet wasn’t about to explode. But mostly, these were people under Jhonnen’s command and the Cartel didn’t get to just kidnap them.

“The shuttle flew toward the Archon’s estates. I’m down to two fit men and one blaster pack—but if you want to hit back, I can get your field intel.”

“Get me what you can,” Jhonnen said. “Vette,” he turned to look at her. “Are you in?”

“Of course,” Vette shook her head. “Who wouldn’t want to crash the estate of the most powerful Hutt on Makeb. Should be fun.”

“Expect a lot of automation,” Bedareux said. “Droids, turrets, particle shields… anything the Archon would hold back or couldn’t use on the battlefield.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen said dully.

“He knows you’re coming, and he’s got the home-team advantage. So basically it’s a death trap.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen repeated, his expression going completely flat.

Good news on top of good news.

<< There is also—for reiterating, but you should understand our predicament here, >> said Nadrin. << I am monitoring the laster drilling, but without careful adjustment, we risk imminent release of subterranean toxins and continental devastation. In short, all life on the planet is very likely to die if I am further distracted. >>
Jhonnen sighed. “Neat. Sergeant, your top priority is keeping people from distracting Nadrin.”

“Sir!” Bedareux saluted and Jhonnen turned, Vette at his side, and headed for the shuttle.

“Are we seriously about to do this just the two of us?” Vette asked. “I’m with you I just wanna know.”

“There’s no one else,” Jhonnen said, stepping into the shuttle. “We stick together and take it one hurdle at a time.”

“Well, at least there’s a plan.”

“Ehhhh,” Jhonnen said. “It’s really more of an inkling.”

“That’s about the extent of your planning capabilities, my lord.” She wrinkled her nose at him to show that she was kidding.

Jhonnen smiled at her and then closed his eyes, centering himself in the dark side of the Force until the shuttle dropped them off a short distance from the Archon’s estate.

A blue flicker around the palace gave away a force field which posed… rather a large problem. Jhonnen and Vette couldn’t get through the force field.

“Ooh,” said Vette with a roll of her eyes. “A force field. Somebody’s scared of us.”

“He should be,” Jhonnen said darkly.

So the first order of business changed from ‘wreak havoc’ to ‘commandeer a holoterminal so they could contact the mining platform.’

Which was, at least, relatively easy to do. Most of the Archon’s forces had been deployed to protect the three mining platforms Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn had taken not long ago, so the forces around the estate were stretched thin and Jhonnen had no qualms about using the Force to pick up droids and smack them into soldiers.

Quinn was on the other side of the holoterminal when Jhonnen contacted the mining platform. “My lord,” he said, saluting.

“There’s a force field,” Jhonnen said flatly. He grabbed the console as the ground rocked beneath his feet. Jhonnen took a deep breath, Nadrin had things under control. He had to trust that Nadrin had things under control. He looked at Quinn. Force field, right. “I need to get through it. There are also a fuckload of guys, but getting through them is straightforward if slightly harrowing.”

“Let me pull up the blueprints of the estate and… yes. My lord, there are laser turrets all around the compound. Turn them on the manor and it should be enough firepower to down the force fields.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Alright.”

He left the holoterminal and, with Vette at his side, set about locating and slicing the laser turrets, carving a path through the droids and soldiers that got in his way until, at long last, the force field was down.

This was taking too long. Someone might have cracked by now.

Jhonnen pushed the fears aside and continued forward.
He hated the Hutts. He had since he was a boy, a small observant boy who knew how hard the Hutts worked his mother. How despite remaining kind of independent and not being a slave, she had to bend to them. She had to do what they said.

It was wrong, and that wrongness burned in Jhonnen’s core the way every injustice his mother had suffered stayed with him. Little embers of hate more powerful than anything Vitreous had tried to instill.

In the palace, the opposition was mostly droids. Using the Force, Jhonnen chucked them into one another and into walls while Vette ducked behind a decorative pillar to fire at the turrets. They moved slowly, carefully, sticking together as best they could with Jhonnen leaping ahead to deal with an enemy and then leaping back to Vette’s side.

More than once they had to crouch behind a pillar and hastily apply kolto or medical stims.

“Tomorrow’s going to suck,” Jhonnen said as he stuck himself in the arm with a stim. “We’re both gonna be sore.”

“Tomorrow’s my day off,” Vette mumbled. “I’m just gonna sleep.”

Jhonnen popped out from behind cover and threw his lightsaber out, bisecting a couple of droids who were standing too close together. “That sounds nice, can I come?”

“Sure,” Vette said. “But Quinn has to nap by himself.”

“A shame really,” they turned down a wide corridor. “He’s probably really comfortable to sleep on.”

“Yeah, if you can dislodge the stick up his ass.”

Turning another corner, Jhonnen sniffed and caught a whiff of burned hair and flesh. He wrinkled his nose with disgust and hurried forward, kicking open a door and Force punting the pair of Regulator soldiers—and a couple of bodies—into the far wall. Vette picked them off when they tried to stand up and Jhonnen started to poke through the pile of dead Imperials until he found Katha Niar, miraculously still alive and sheltered from the Force punt by virtue of having been dropped mostly under a table at the time.

Jhonnen helped her mostly upright, taking stock of her extensive injuries, the worst being a crack in the side of her head where some of her hair had been shaved off in a circle.

“My lord,” she said through cracked, bloody lips. “I’m so sorry. The Archon… he had machines… he put a tube in my head,” one of her hands reached up to the crack in her skull. “He knows we saved the planet. Son of a bitch’s going to tell the Hutts.”

“He needs to die. He needs to die now,” Jhonnen said. “I don’t suppose you know where he is.”

Niar didn’t smile, but she did nod. “I failed, but I’m not stupid,” She stood, clutching her stomach with one arm like her insides might spill out.

Jhonnen and Vette followed her as she limped towards the Archon’s assembly chamber.

They arrived in time to watch him arguing with his mercenary commanders.

“Besides,” said the Archon. “Makeb is not exploding, and I now have proof. Prepare to attack all Imperial positions: once the atmospheric interference clears I will—”
“You’re fucked,” Jhonnen snapped, loud enough that it echoed around the chamber.

“Ah,” said the Archon, looking mostly bored. “The Wrath of the Emperor’s rotting corpse. You made a valiant effort. Alas, it is the Hutt Empire that will receive Makeb’s bounty. My people—”

Jhonnen hurled his lightsaber forward, slicing into the Hutt. The Archon’s eyes went wide. He brought one hand forward and the air sizzled as his oily hand met the freshly cauterized flesh. For a moment, just a moment, it looked like the Archon was going to say something.

Jhonnen snarled: “I didn’t come here to listen to you make speeches.”

And the light in the Archon’s eyes blinked out.

Jhonnen looked at the commanders. “Makeb is going to explode, but the Empire needs mercenaries and it looks like your meal ticket is maggot chow.”

“I don’t believe you,” said one of the commanders, an angry looking chagrin. “I think Makeb’s safe.”

“There’s an easy way to handle this,” Niar said, limping into the room. “All you have to do is kill everyone on the planet.”

Jhonnen, who, along with Vette, happened to currently be part of ‘everyone’ gave her a skeptical look.

Niar shrugged and coughed up some blood. “The laser drills, the groundquakes… what else are scientists for?”

“You’re bluffing,” said the mercenary commander.

“Woulnd’t be the first world the Empire’s destroyed,” Niar countered.

<< This is Nadrin, >> said Nadrin in Jhonnen’s ear. << With the proper adjustments, I… could render most of the planet lifeless. But evacuations are unfinished. Tens of thousands would be buried in rubble or incinerated by magma. It would be.. Unfortunate.”

“Okay… let’s put that on the backburner.” He looked at the mercenaries. “Leave now and get paid for it.”

There was a tense moment of silence before all three mercenary commanders nodded. “You have a deal.” The terminals clicked off.

Jhonnen turned his attentions to Niar as she crumpled to the floor. “I can’t feel my hands,” she said distantly, like it was happening to someone else. “I’d have liked to see Dromund Kaas again, but… you’ll make sure it was worth it?” She looked up at him. “Makeb, I mean. While the war’s still going on. Make sure we survive?”

He stared at her, hating the way a lie bubbled up to his lips. “Of course I will. But let me try and help you. I’ve got a medpac left it might be enough to get you to a medic.”

She shook her head. “It’s alright. We knew it was a suicide mission—don’t think I could’ve borne it otherwise. It’s been an honor serving. Better than labeling boxes for the rest of my life…” she teetered forward and Jhonnen felt her life as it snuffed out.

He cleared his throat and touched his earpiece. “It’s over.”
“This is Sergeant Bedareux. I think we’re done, but Darth Marr will need a brief from the station; I’ll set it up. Support team—”

“Send someone to the Archon’s estate,” Jhonnen interrupted. “We need to collect the bodies of the dead and make sure their families are notified. Everyone but Katha Niar is in the interrogation room, Niar is on the floor of the assembly room.”

“I… of course, sir. Support team out.”

Jhonnen lowered his hand and looked at Vette. “We’re done. I have to report to Marr and then we can go… somewhere else.”

“You promised me a vacation,” Vette said gently. “Let’s go somewhere where we can pretend the war’s not a thing.”

Jhonnen gave a tired nod. “So I did. We’ll plan it together back on the ship.”

They caught a shuttle back to Gravity Hook 7. Quinn met them at the turbolift and the trio headed up to the orbital ring and onto The Sanguine Tide. Much as he wanted to just go to his room and collapse, Jhonnen remained in the lounge, refusing to relax until this was actually over.

They docked with the orbital station and Jhonnen headed in by himself, moving quickly to the room where he was supposed to meet with Darth Marr.

Marr was there via holo, but Jhonnen was surprised to see Nadrin and Captain Hanthor waiting for him. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised, it was possible that Hanthor was next in line for command after Niar and Marr just wanted the scientist to explain what was going on.

It didn’t matter at any rate.

Nadrin and Hanthor both bowed when Jhonnen got close and they all turned their attention to the holo of Marr.

“How is the planet stable?” Marr asked.

<< Aftershocks continue, but the core has reached equilibrium. >> Nadrin explained. << We are finalizing safe techniques to mine the isotope-5. >>

“Sergeant Bedareux is seeing to security on the ground,” said Captain Hanthor. “And Lord Cytharat’s almost fully recovered. He’ll be back from Dromund Kaas shortly.”

That was good to hear at least, Jhonnen thought.

“Enough,” Marr said. He turned his face to Jhonnen. “I did not expect this outcome, Wrath—but it serves well. Your team was satisfactory?”

“Very,” Jhonnen said. “And many of them died to achieve this victory.”

He hated putting on his best manners to deal with the Council. His best manners were still pretty rough around the edges.

“Let their names be etched in the walls of Kaas City. It will be their monument, or their pyre,” Marr said.

Jhonnen resisted the urge to roll his eyes by inches.
“Thank you, my lord,” said Hanthor.

Marr dismissed him and Nadrin with a wave of his hand and only began speaking to Jhonen again when the room was clear. “For the next month, each gram of isotope-5 we procure will be needed for our defenses. The next phase of the war begins.”

Jhonen nodded.

“The Hutt Cartel is weak and scattered, and the Jedi will turn back to us. At last, they are prepared to shed blood.”

Jhonen’s thoughts jumped to Kira. His best friend and now his enemy. He clenched his jaw as hard as he could to keep from tearing up. Clearing his throat he forced his teeth apart. “How’s the war progressing?”

“Observe.”

Marr flickered away and instead the holo was filled with the leaders of the Republic. The new Supreme Chancellor, a twi’lek by the name of Saresh, stood in front of a Republic banner with Supreme Commander Jace Malcom on her right and Grand Master Shan on her left. “Fellow Citizens of the Republic,” she announced in a bright, clear voice. “The Hutt crisis is over, and we have proven again that compassion is not a weakness, but our strength.” She nodded to the applause. “Yet that is not why I stand before you. Instead, I can finally confirm what many have suspected for months: the Sith Emperor is dead.”

Dead? Jhonen furrowed his brow. The Emperor was immortal. He’d been the Emperor for at least a millennia. He was able to possess bodies with full awareness, holding onto every scrap of self as he did.

Grand Master Shan took over, saying: “A Jedi strike team confronted the Emperor during a recent attack on Dromund Kaas. Now a joint SIS and Jedi committee has concluded that the galaxy’s greatest villain is gone forever.”

Saresh continued. “This does not change the fight ahead. The Dark Council remains the true political power in the Empire. But it sends a message to the Sith and their followers: We are coming for you.”

“They speak truth,” Marr said as he flickered back into place. “The Emperor is gone, dying if not dead, no matter what our propagandists say. He will not be mourned.”

“The Empire’s going to go nuts,” Jhonen said. “He was sort of the linchpin of the whole system.”

“I do not ask for your allegiance,” said Marr, in a tone that made Jhonen feel like he was not asking for his allegiance because he was telling. “But the Wrath and the Dark Council must work together if anything it to survive. Now is our chance to reforge in the flames of battle—to reshape the Empire into an image of unity and strength. In the coming months, we will stand against the Republic offensive and those who would weaken us from within—and emerge stronger.”

There was one problem: Jhonen didn’t care about the Empire beyond the bare minimum he had to do to keep Quinn happy. The Empire had been nothing but terrible to him. Being Sith had cost him his oldest friend. His mother had died. Vette had been enslaved. The Dark Council were a bunch of bickering old Sith lords pushing their own agendas in an attempt to hoard more power for themselves.

Marr might have been the exception to that, but Jhonen neither liked nor trusted him.
But at the end of the day… he had to agree. He had to agree because they’d go after Vette and Quinn if he didn’t.

And Jhonnen couldn’t let that happen.

At least Jaesa was safe.

“You’re right,” Jhonnen said, willing the words to come out sincere. “Chaos is bad for everybody.”

“Today you bought us time,” said Marr. “Isotope-5 will pay for the Empire’s new foundation, and the Republic knows nothing of our actions.”

Jhonnen’s thoughts jumped to Kira again. She knew more than she should. Her friend Katsulas knew more than he should.

Had Jhonnen jeopardized the whole operation?

Had there been another choice?

“We will speak when the enemy strikes again. Together, we will choose the destiny of the Empire and retake the galaxy.”

Jhonnen inclined his head respectfully, and the holocall ended. He rubbed the back of his neck and tilted his face towards the distant ceiling.

Everything was complicated, and it was looking to just get more so.

He headed back to the airlock and onto his ship, stepping first into the cockpit. “Lay in a course for Mannan,” he said. “And then go take a break. Thanks for all your help on Makeb.”

“It was my duty, my lord,” Quinn said.

Jhonnen nodded and headed into his room.

Vette was curled up in his blankets, her boots, belt and pocket-covered vest on the floor. Jhonnen smiled a little and sat down to remove his own boots, belt, gloves and vest. He pulled out his datapad and made a reservation before crawling into bed beside Vette.

He couldn’t blame her. He had a plush mattress and she had a reasonably comfortable cot.

Besides, he liked having her near.

Everything was a little less desperate when Vette was around.
Reign Of Terror

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen and Quinn land on Oricon to deal with the rebellious Dread Masters.

Jhonnen got nervous when he noticed the amount of debris around Oricon as they flew in. He set a hand on the back of Quinn’s chair. “Get out of orbit, Vette and I’ll take the shuttle down.”

Vette was waiting, fully kitted out with a concerned frown on her mouth. “So what’s happening?”

Jhonnen exhaled. “So, from my briefing this morning, the Dread Masters—those guys Pierce and Quinn rescued from Belsavis—rebelled against the Empire and started building their own Empire of terror. One of ‘em, Styrak, I guess, took over a city and got taken out by a Republic strike team. An Imperial task force was sent and after twelve hours, Marr has heard nothing from them. So we’re supposed to see what’s left of the task force and put a stop to the Dread Masters or at least warn Marr about what they’re up to and what their strengths are.”

“So, quintet of terrifying sith lords?” Vette asked. “Are you sure you don’t want to bring Quinn?”

Jhonnen studied her and then exhaled. He wasn’t going to expose her to something called ‘The Dread Masters’ without her permission. “Valid. Let me go get him.”

He headed back to the cockpit. “On second thought, I’d rather you come with me, you have more experience with The Dread Masters.”

“Of course, my lord. I believe Vette can handle staying in one place while we work.”

It was… almost… a compliment.

Almost.

Still snide and insulting, but Jhonnen was learning to spot the difference between them acting like this and them being actually snide and insulting at one another. It had been four years, after all. Practically a lifetime.

Vette took her place in the cockpit and Quinn went to assemble his kit before meeting Jhonnen in the small hangar. They took the shuttle down to the planet’s surface, something dark and nefarious twisting in Jhonnen’s thoughts the closer to the surface they got.

There was something wrong on Oricon and it smothered out something warm so he could only barely feel anything but terror.

The wrongness slipped up into his brain when the shuttle set down. Cold, inky terror pressed against his throat.

You have come far too late.

He looked to Quinn to confirm that he’d heard that. Quinn’s hand had shot for his blaster.
By Oricon’s next sunrise, your worlds will burn.

His mother was going to die! He had to help her. He had to—

Jhonnen exhaled through his nose, his mother had been dead a long time. This terror was artificial. Potent, yes, but artificial. Someone wanted him to feel the most terrifying moment of his life.

Which meant Quinn, who had gone still, was probably experiencing the same thing.

He wasn’t going to let them fuck with Quinn like that.

He focused on pushing his own awareness out, sheltering Quinn as best he could as they continued into what should have been an abandoned Imperial camp. The camp was not abandoned. It looked scattered and like everyone was on edge, but there were people guarding the front and, as Quinn and Jhonnen drew closer, the panic trying to claw its way up Jhonnen’s throat and out his mouth lessened.

It was still there, but he could almost ignore it as his own shielding efforts came in touch with someone else’s.

Someone who was better at it than he was.

He found the sith responsible, a tall human male with his hair wild, looking drained and miserable but determined.

“Three more gone, my lord,” said an Imperial at the sith’s side. She tucked her datapad away. “Two commandos took knives to one another—hallucination-induced psychosis apparently—and Major Strix fled camp.”

The Sith pinched the bridge of his nose. “Stupid, stupid… knives? They can’t even resist carving one another like roasts?!” He lowered his hand. “I’m sorry. I know the things they saw… I can feel the Dread Masters. I can push them, but I can’t stop it all. I’m so sorry, Maiya…”

“Lord Hargrev?” Jhonnen asked, coming up with Quinn at his side. “Darth Marr asked me to find you.”

“What?”

The Imperial cleared her throat. “We’re the remains of the task force, yes. You’ll have to forgive us—Lord Hargrev is shielding our minds from the Masters, but it takes a toll.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement. He was only trying to shield two people, he could imagine how difficult it would be to shield a whole encampment.

He wouldn't let Quinn go crazy. If he failed and everything else fell apart, he wouldn't let Quinn go crazy.

Jhonnen looked at Maiya. “What’s been happening?”

“Between their mental dominance and their orbital weaponry; the Dread Masters managed to annihilate our ships. The survivors regrouped here,” explained Maiya. “Our hope was to make one final push to the Masters’ fortress, but the Dread Guard has us trapped. We don’t need firepower—we need manpower to break out.”

“Okay,” Jhonnen nodded. “Where can we find more manpower?”
“The Republic,” said Hargrave. “They came to Oricon, too—I can feel their soldiers out there. Trapped and afraid.”

“Works for me, but will you… can you work with them?”

“They’re desperate,” said Hargrave. “They have no hope of rescue and we share a common enemy. You can mold them like clay.”

“It’s murder out there,” explained Maiya. “The Dread Guard have machine support—enough to cut our reconnaissance into pieces.”

“How long before we’re overrun?” asked Hargrave.

“Hours, at best.” She looked at the ground for a moment. “Point taken.”

Hargrave looked at Jhonnen. “I will shield you against the madness as well as I can. Bring us the soldiers we need to survive.”

“I can shield myself,” Jhonnen said. “Focus your efforts on your people.”

Moving through the small camp, Jhonnen was too aware of the itchy trigger fingers around them. Yet he dare not pull his lightsabers. He could not be the first person to make a move.

“I don’t believe either Lord Hargrave or the Captain know who you are, my lord,” Quinn said thoughtfully.

Jhonnen shrugged. “Or they don’t care, given the circumstances.”

“Given the circumstances, I believe I can overlook it, my lord.”

Jhonnen gave him a very thin smile, but it was a smile.

The Republic forces were bound up in escape pods not far from the Imperial camp. Each pod had been set upon by forces Jhonnen had to assume belonged to the Dread Masters. Through the Force he felt nothing but fear, it blanketed the soldiers around them. He felt Quinn’s determination and something else he couldn’t focus on for the fear.

It was like treading water in a deep sea formless and motionless and terrifying beneath.

He dispatched the Dread Guard and popped open the hatch, rolling out of the way as someone fired. “G-get back!”

“My name is Jhonnen,” Jhonnen said, forcing the words to be steady. “I’m part of the Imperial landing party. I’ve come to take you to safety.”

“This is a Imp trick!” said someone else.

“It’s not, I promise.” He extended his protection over the five people in the pod. “We’ve got a man trying to shield people from the Dread Masters’ influence. Head due west. The protection I’ve extended to you will peter out when I move away, please hurry.”

*We will taste your fear,* said a Dread Master, *or we will taste your rage.*

“Please don’t lick the Wrath,” Jhonnen muttered, moving to repeat the process with another escape pod.
At the fifth escape pod, he felt a glimmer of something that wasn’t fear and he reached for it.

His eyes went wider as a new fear surged into his veins, turning them to ice water. *Kira.* What was *Kira* doing here?

The hatch on the escape pod blew open and Kira climbed free, one hand holding her ignited dualsaber. Coming out behind her was Katsulas.

Jhonnen reached and grabbed Quinn’s wrist before the other man went to point his blaster at either Jedi.

“My lord?”

“I know them,” Jhonnen said, forcing his eyes away from the fury on Kira’s face. He cleared his throat and looked at Katsulas. “The Imperials are set up to the west and a bunch of your people have joined them. We’ve got someone shielding them against the Dread Masters but we need to work together and we need to work quickly or we are *all* going to die.”

He felt Kira rudely probe his thoughts for the truth and then her thoughts just lingered against him.

Kira always did pissed off when she was scared. She hated being afraid more than she hated anything else and it showed.

“We’re about to head back,” Jhonnen said, not liking how neither Kira nor Katsulas hadn’t said anything. “We… we need you.”

Katsulas nodded. “Well, it’s this or face the Dread Masters alone.” He ignited his second purple lightsaber. “We’ll follow you.”

Jhonnen nodded and turned around to head back to the Imperial camp.

“My lord?”

Jhonnen exhaled. “I grew up with that woman and fought Darth Malgus with the pair of them. We can trust them.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” Quinn said, probably thinking that they could not trust a pair of Jedi.

“What are you doing here, Jhonnen?” Kira asked from behind them.

“Dealing with the enemies of the Empire,” Jhonnen said dryly. “The Dread Masters have broken away in a big way, which I’m figuring you know because if Katsulas wasn’t *on* the Republic strike team the Jedi Order is dumber than I’ve heard.”

There was a broken sort of laugh. “He’s right,” Katsulas said. “I did kill Styrax.”

“See,” Jhonnen said. “I knew it.”

_The things we will show you. The humiliations you will endure._

_You think these allies will make you stronger? They will make you weak._

Luckily, Jhonnen had had someone telling him that Kira would make him weak for seven years before finally *killing* that person. He didn’t believe the Dread Masters about it.

They headed back to the Imperial base and Jhonnen deflected a couple of blaster bolts.
“They’re friendly,” Kira muttered.

“Hey,” Jhonnen said, trying to find kind of a bright spot. “That could have been aimed at any one of us.”

“Charming.”

“How’re your heads?” Jhonnen asked, turning around. He looked at Kira first and moved his gaze to Katsulas before she could get on his case about staring at her.

They were enemies now.

Katsulas frowned. “Fine but it’s work to keep it that way, they keep… pushing. Trying to find weaknesses. Everything smells like burned skin and ozone.”

Kira shuddered. “It just feels like that week where I realized I couldn’t remember anything that had happened.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Given as for me it feels like the moment before my mother died, I can guess they’re pulling on the scariest moments we’ve had. Which is… awesome. I don’t know how to fight that.” He was bad at fighting things he couldn’t actually fight. “Everything else is just anxiety, which I’m great at.”

You’re giving too much information to people who are eventually going to try and kill you. When the Jedi Order sends someone to take care of you, it will be Katsulas, and Kira will be at his side.

And you won’t even have the wherewithal to defend yourself.

“I’m operational, my lord. With your shielding, the Dread Masters are a minor complaint. Though I would like to finish quickly.” Quinn was lying, but Jhonnen appreciated it.

“I think we fight it by sticking together,” Katsulas volunteered. “If we’re all experiencing different things, things we were alone for, then not being alone should be the remedy. Keeping in verbal contact should help too.”

Jhonnen exhaled and nodded. “Makes sense.”

Kira had someone smart in her corner now. Someone more than the blunt instrument Jhonnen had become.

No! He had so much to do, he couldn’t let himself get despondent on top of all the other banthashit.

He had to be on top of shit for Quinn and because if he slipped up he’d never see Vette again.

Vette had taken the ship and left them. She was free what was reason did she have to stay?

She’d stay because she liked him. He had to believe that she liked him. She spent at least one night a week asleep beside him, breathing gently over the hum of the hyperdrive that usually got him to sleep. She smiled when he brought her caf. She told him stories when his brain was trying to eat itself like a rylothian python.

“We should report into Lord Hargrave,” Quinn said, putting a hand on Jhonnen’s shoulder. The weight was comforting, pulling Jhonnen back to himself.

“Yeah.”
He lead the others back to where Lord Hargrave and Maiya were waiting. Hargrave was in a conversation with some of the troopers Jhonnen and Quinn had rescued.

“Once, I thought myself a monster. I played in rivers of blood and laughed as innocents quaked. Yet when I touched the Dread Masters, I saw that my darkness was but a shadow of true depravity.”

The Republic Captain crossed his arms over his chest. “And you want us to trust you because, what… you’ve been ‘redeemed’?”

“He wants you to trust him so we can all go the fuck home,” Katsulas said. “Stand down, Captain Branno.”

The Captain turned and quickly saluted. “Sir. You can’t be serious.”

“I want to go home. As do you. As does every other person on this damned moon. If we can cooperate long enough to stop the Dread Masters then we will get to go home.”

“Yes sir.” The Captain went to get his people in line.

Katsulas looked at Hargrave. “What you were saying to them…”

Hargrave sighed and shook his head. “It was true enough. In the Dread Masters, I saw a cancer. Now I recognize my own disease.”

“Forgive the interruption,” Maiya said. “But we should discuss our plans for the Masters’ fortress.”

“Not yet,” insisted Hargrave. “I sense… pain, fear, and death nearby. Two sources of power outside the fortress walls, coming for us.” He closed his eyes. “I see no more.”

“Okay…” Jhonnen cleared his throat. “I’ll go… deal with those. You two should rest up.”

“Two sources,” Katsulas said, holding up two fingers. “You and Kira hit one, the captain and I will take the other.”

Jhonnen’s expression severed. “Why?” the word came out growled. He wouldn’t risk Quinn. Quinn was the only person on this damned moon who wasn’t at least a little expendable.

Kira.

Was he capable of doing anything that would endanger Kira? Even now that they were enemies. Probably not.

Katsulas shrugged. “Keeping tabs on one another? Inter-side cooperation?”

“It’s a solid idea, my lord,” Quinn said, surprising Jhonnen.

And then he realized why Quinn would agree to it.

If Jhonnen had vouched for Katsulas and Kira, they could be trusted to a point. Jedi were famously honorable, even to their own detriment. And this would give Quinn the opportunity to analyze the fighting style of one of the Republic’s finest.

If Jhonnen refused, it said a couple of things: that he didn’t trust Katsulas, and that he didn’t think
Quinn could hold his own.

He did not think that Quinn could hold his own against Katsulas, but he also didn’t want Quinn knowing that.

He nodded. “Fine. But Hargrave isn’t shielding Quinn, I am. So that means you have to.”

Katsulas nodded. “I can do that.”

Jhonnen, somehow in charge of things and deeply uncomfortable with that fact, looked back at Hargrave. “See about a strategy to get us into the Fortress.”

“We are grateful,” Maiya gave a bow. “And we will be ready.”

Jhonnen and Kira walked along the coastline of the small island in relative silence, neither letting the other out of their sight as they proceeded, looking for the terraforming devices the Dread Masters were using to sow fear into the very soil.

Jhonnen couldn’t take it anymore. “Are you mad at me or are you mad at the Dread Masters?”

“Do I have to pick?” Kira asked. Then she stopped and took a hand off her dualsaber to pinch the bridge of her nose. “I’m sorry, Red, I just… I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Sorry.” He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the Dread Masters nosing at his guard. They were looking for a foothold in his anxiety about her, but without having to shield Quinn it was easier to keep them at bay. “This is probably the worst place for a reunion. I mean, the resort planet was bad too but this is… yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They continued forward, spotting one of the terraforming devices and springing towards it. Jhonnen got the attention of the Dread Guard and the horrible worm-like monsters with the big flat teeth while Kira pulverized the thing until it was no longer in working order.

“So how many underlings do you have?” Kira asked as they started to look for another device.

“They’re not underlings. I work with two people, you’ve met both of them.” He took a breath. “I don’t suppose you know how… um, remember when we were dealing with Malgus? And there was a Jedi girl with me and—”

“She’s fine,” Kira answered. “The council’s giving her a hard time, but I saw her on Tython. She’s been given a new Master, guy by the name of Timmns.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Glad something came of that.”

“I think Kat’s got her holofrequency.”

Jhonnen looked at the ground. “I want to, but… she needs space to heal and reconnect with what it means to be a Jedi. I’d just… I’d confuse things again.”

“You don’t really confuse things for me,” Kira said.

Jhonnen barked a laugh. “Kira, you are the most determined, self-assured, impassioned person I’ve ever met. You’d flourish no matter whose rulebook you’re using.”
She frowned at him.

He held his hands up to defend himself. “I think you’d make a shitty *Sith Lord* because of the Lord part. There’s a lot of political banthacrap that I think would just piss you off, but that doesn’t make you not passionate and driven and those are actually fine traits for someone following the Sith code.”

Kira scowled at him and stormed past to find the next terraforming device, the same way she had when they were kids and he’d irritated her in a way that’d made sense.

Jhonnen, like always, let the topic die. “So do you and Katsulas always fight together?”

Kira nodded.

And when they’d destroyed the device, she actually said something. “We’ve been together since I was a Padawan. He was actually my master for a couple of months.”

“Huh, you two seem like equals.”

“We were back then too, but I called him Master in front of people. What about you?”

“Ever hear of ‘Darth Baras’?”

Kira shook her head.

“His master, Vengean, took over after you guys took out Angral. Baras was a schemey political type who wanted to rule the Empire himself. He… honestly made a pretty good show of it. Got pretty close.”

“What happened to him?”

“I did.” Jhonnen said. “He tried to kill me and I took it poorly. Spent about a year systematically dismantling his power base. They made me the Wrath at the end of it.”

“Sounds like a big year.”

“I also killed my father that year, so yes, yes it was.”

The last terraforming device was located in a cave. Kira destroyed the device while Jhonnen headed deeper into the cave, eyes open for anything out of place and finding, speaking of out of place, a console, monitor, and suspiciously well-kept platform.

Figuring that the Dread Masters weren’t using it for anything conducive, Jhonnen did what he did best and put his lightsabers to work, turning everything into rubble before meeting back up with Kira.

“This is base,” said Maiya in his ear. “Whatever you’ve done, it’s made the soldiers less susceptible to hallucinations.”

“Let’s get back.”

“Let me call Kat and see how they’re doing,” Kira said, pulling out her comm.

After a minute, Katsulas appeared in Kira’s palm. “How’s it going?”

“How’s Quinn?” Jhonnen asked *immediately.*
“He’s fine, watching my back while I talk to you. Everything alright?”

Kira nodded. “We just finished. You?”

“Almost. We’ll meet you back at the Imperial encampment.”

Kira tucked her comm away and then paused. She extended her free hand to him and wiggled her fingers, summoning his hand to hers.

Jhonnen took her hand, pressing his palm to her palm. “Aren’t we enemies?”

“Kat pointed out that I was never going to live up to that,” she rolled her eyes. “So no. We should be. But we’re not.”

“And if… when… the Republic sends you to stop me?”

“We’ll take you alive, if you’ll let us.”

“Shit, Kira, if Quinn and Vette are safe, I won’t even put up a fight.”

She smiled at him. “I kinda wanna kiss you right now, I won’t, because we’re busy and I don’t know what’s going on with you and Vette, but I want to.”

“There’s nothing ‘goin on’ per say. But Vette, Vette is… she’s everything,” Jhonnen said. “I wish I could tell her… everything, about you and about how much you both mean to me. The fact that I love her. But I don’t want to risk what we have.”

“No risk, no reward,” Kira reminded him.

“Yeah ‘maybe we’ll make out’ isn’t really a counterpoint to ‘maybe she’ll get mad at or even leave me’. Kisses would be great but it’s just not worth it. I'm not missing out on anything. She's my best friend, I'd die for her.”

"I remember when you first said that to me. I think we were like… 10".

"I meant it," Jhonnen said with a small, jaunty shrug. "I probably still would."

"Vette's lucky. You two could…"

"Yeah, maybe. If she were interested."

They let go of each other’s hands and left the cave, returning to the Imperial encampment where they ate a couple of protein bars and waited for Katsulas and Quinn. They didn’t wait long and met the other two at the entrance to the camp, Quinn saluting Jhonnen once he was past the guns.

Jhonnen was unspeakably glad to see that Quinn was, not only alright, but also his usual self and immediately extended his shield to the other man so there would be no break in coverage when Katsulas withdrew his protection.

Quinn did not say that the experience had been ‘most informative’ but he did nod to Jhonnen as if that were the case. Jhonnen smiled at him and the quartet, now reunited, headed down to speak with Lord Hargrave and Maiya.

“We’re done,” Jhonnen said. “The tech’s destroyed.”

Hargrave nodded, dropping his chin and looked at the soil. “Thank you for that. You know, all my
life, I aspired to heights of cruelty and passion. But the Dread Masters… they went too far. We went too far. Passion without humanity is meaningless.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement.

“Shall I have Maiya salvage what you didn’t destroy? I’m sure someone clever could make use of it.”

Jhonnen frowned and shook his head. “Not just no, but hell no. This shit stays buried.”

“So be it,” Hargrave said dully.

“The troops are almost ready,” said Maiya. “We can secure a route to the fortress and protect your flank if you act as vanguard. But,” she frowned. “We still need a way through the fortress gates. According to our recon data, they’re built with highly dense materials: conventionally unbreakable.”

“Can we get around them?” Katsulas asked, folding his arms over his chest and standing at Jhonnen’s side. “How are they controlled?”

Lord Hargrave stroked his chin. “There’s an outer watchtower with command of the gates. Its computers are built with ancient Sith and Rakata technologies—we scanned it from orbit.” He nodded to himself. “I know the Dread Masters’ designs—if you can seize the machine core, I can extract the codes needed to attack the fortress.”

Maiya saluted. “We’ll have our troops start moving on the fortress itself. Bring us the machine core, and they’ll strike at your command.”

“Works for me,” Jhonnen said. He turned and Katsulas followed him back out of the camp and kept pace with him while he loped towards the watchtower.

They battled their way inside, the three Force users sweeping through the opposition and then pausing so Quinn could tend their injuries. By the time they reached the control room, Quinn was running low on both kolto and stims, but they were almost finished.

The control room housed three consoles, likely controlling the static force field around the machine core, which appeared to be a holocron.

Jhonnen hit the left console while Katsulas hit the right, both slicing furiously. Jhonnen frowned. He could slice and Vette had taught him a couple of tricks, but he wasn’t good at it the way she was. Despite this, he couldn’t imagine wishing she were with him. Vette was on the ship, she’d pick them up when this was finished. She was safe.

“Got it!” said Kat from across the room. A siren went off.

“Keep working,” Kira insisted. “I’ll handle the droids!”

There were droids. Lovely.

Quinn stood beside him, back to the console. “Don’t worry my lord. I’ll handle the droids.”

Jhonnen nodded and went back to work. When he’d sliced through, more droids slid in on either side of the console, but Jhonnen kept his head down and kept working, trusting Quinn to watch over him.
With the consoles hacked, Katsulas went to grab the machine core, jerking it out of its compartment as a man in red robes and a truly ridiculous hat stormed into the room.

He ignited a dualsaber and Jhonnen ignited both of his lightsabers and leapt forward. He parried the first few strokes before juiking to the left and carving off his opponent’s leg. Jhonnen followed it up by decapitating the man and turned back to his companions. “Let’s get out of here before more—”

Heat flashed into his head, searing and bubbling so he could almost smell his brains as they cooked. A scream ripped out of his mouth, shuddering the world around him.

Someone called his name, Jhonny. Mother? Kira? Vette?

His eyes wrenched themselves painfully wide and all he could see were the Dread Masters.

*Long ago, we learned of your abilities in the Belsavis prison.*

*Since then you have grown. In mind and body; in skill and spirit.*

*Jhonnen?*

*Meanwhile, we have tasted death. On Darvannis, the Republic slew Lord Styrak and ripped him from our union.*

*From our wound bleeds our memories; our names; our ambitions. We tasted oblivion, and it drowns us. Like you, we are changing.*

“What do you want?” Jhonnen demanded, gasping for air. “What do you want with me?”

Someone touched him. It should have been soothing.

*Once, we desired an empire. Now, with the death of Lord Styrak, we are going mad.*

*The wound must be healed. Our union requires a sixth—or there will be only chaos.*

*No! Jhonnen’s mind rebelled against the idea. No one else was going to shape him for darkness. No one else was going to use him the way Vitreous had. He would die before he let that happen.*

*Jhonny, come back*

*You were the Emperor’s Wrath,* continued the Dread Masters unabated. *You drove a Jedi to the brink of madness and strike terror into the hearts of millions.*

“Not on purpose!” Jhonnen screamed. “Not because I want to!”

*Soon you will join us as our Scion of Terror. We will feast on your dreams, and our union shall be strong again.*

“I won’t! You can’t make me!”

*You will not deny the truth when you have been humbled, stripped of all but fear.*

*Even now, our ships prepare to launch and deliver our devices to other worlds—Dromund Kaas, Nar Shaddaa, and Coruscant.*

*Populations will be infected and planets overgrown. Mothers will kill daughters as soldiers weep*
in terror.

All you love and prize will fall. You will try to stop our ships and fail. Then you will be ready to join us.

The vision ended. Jhonnen was kneeling on the stone floor of the watchtower, his limbs heavy and his blood cold. Someone had their arms around him. It wasn’t a hug so much as it was pinning his arms down so he couldn’t hurt himself. Jhonnen blinked the horrified tears away and reached up to touch the arms of the person holding him. His hand made contact with thick material.

A jacket.

Quinn.

Jhonnen gave the wrist a pat and then a squeeze in gratitude. “I’m… I’m alright,” he lied. “It was a vision of the Dread Masters. That’s all.”

Quinn let go of him slowly and drew back as Jhonnen brought himself upright.

Jhonnen tried to focus on the fact that Quinn had wrapped his arms around him. That they’d come so far in only about four almost five years. They’d gone from distrustful co-workers to Quinn flinging himself down on Jhonnen to protect or comfort him, with Jhonnen remaining in the Empire because he wouldn’t sell Quinn up river.

It was a lot.

Are you okay? Kira asked silently.

No, he replied, unable to lie through their Force bond. “The Dread Masters have a fleet of ships ready to carry their terror-machines to Dromund Kaas, Nar Shaddaa and Coruscant. We need to meet back up with Hargrave, get through to the fortress and stop those ships.”

“What happened to you, my lord?” Quinn asked, radiating concern.

Jhonnen forced a wry smile, eyes stinging with the threat of more tears. “Job offer.” He wiped his eyes. “I told them to shove it.” He pulled out his comm device and contacted Darth Marr.

“Wrath?” said Marr on the other end.

“I need a complete blockade of the Oricon system until I say otherwise. The Dread Masters are trying to launch ships with the capacity to take out entire worlds. Until I call you back no ships need to leave this system.”

Marr was quiet for a moment. “I can spare a fleet.”

“Good. I’ll call soon.” Jhonnen hung up.

Kira forced a smile. “So do people seriously just call you ‘Wrath’?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Better than Darth Volens if i’m being honest.”

“How’d you get saddled with that?” Katsulas asked.

Jhonnen brought his hands up. “Either it was thematically appropriate because of how I took down Darth Baras or Darth Vowrawn was having a laugh. Darth Jhonnen just… isn’t intimidating.”
“No,” Kira agreed. “It really isn’t.”

While Hargrave got the codes off the computer, Quinn restocked with what kolto and stims he could requisition.

Around them, the camp got worse as the Dread Masters tightened their grip.

Kira came up and nudged his thoughts, curling them around him because it would have been inappropriate and dangerous for both of them if they took hands.

He wrapped his thoughts around her. *Kira, I’m scared.*

Just like when they were kids, she twined herself around and through his Force signature. *Don’t be scared. It’ll be fine.*

He wanted to trust her. It would have been so easy to lean into her assurances the way he used to. But he held himself back. After this she would leave again, and who knew if they’d been on opposing sides the next time they ran into each other.

He had to stand on his own.

“You definitely inspire loyalty,” Kira said. “When you went down the captain was right on top of you, in case Kat or I took the opening.”

“Quinn’s a phenomenal asset,” Jhonnen said.

Kira cocked an eyebrow at him.

He smiled a little. “I’m very fond of him personally, but…” You were asking why I couldn’t go with you? Quinn is why. He’d never abandon the Empire and if I defect they’ll skin him.

Kira nodded. “We should probably get going.”

The quartet, re-armed and calmed down, headed out to deal with the ships. It was a small fleet, and the ships themselves were diminutive, little more than shuttles. Quinn dropped grenades into the open maintenance hatches and allowed himself to be jerked out of harm’s way by Jhonnen while Kira and Katsulas handled the commanders.

When they returned to Hargrave at the Imperial base camp it was with the thread of cautious optimism. Jhonnen, on the way back, called Marr and had him pull off the blockade. He tossed his comm a couple of times. He *wanted* to call Vette but he didn’t have a *reason* to call Vette.

But maybe he’d be able to go home soon.

“Lord Wrath. It is done.” Lord Hargrave gave a shallow bow.

Maiya gave a deeper bow. “The gates to the fortress are open. Squads of Republic and Imperial troops are holding a path.”

Hargrave nodded. “And now that you’ve neutralized the Dread Master’s attack, I expect you’ll go for the throat.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said, looking at Katsulas. “We will.”

Katsulas nodded his agreement.
“Stop them,” pleaded Lord Hargrave. “Show the Empire that their depravity leads to weakness, not strength. Make sure no Sith is ever tempted to follow their path.”

“That’s the plan,” Jhonnen answered.

“When we’re finished we’ll have made an example of the Dread Masters. They won’t be a problem ever again.”

“My acolytes and I will confront the enemy through the Force as you break their flesh,” promised Hargrave. “We may even be useful.”

Pain seared through Jhonnen’s head, right behind the eyes. He screamed. His scream joined others, until it felt like the whole camp was screeching in pain.

Not enough, one of the Dread Masters growled through the Force.

Jhonnen grit his teeth and forced their influence back.

You dared to stop our launch. For every Dread Guard killed, we will destroy your soldiers.

Unless, he felt a cruel smirk, You wish to bargain.

Tell us a secret. Tell us what you fear and we will spare your servants.

“Fine!” Jhonnen yelled. There was no way to know if the Dread Masters would make good on their end of the bargain, but Jhonnen couldn’t risk it. “I’m afraid of isolation! Of being alone again!”

Let that thought suffuse you.

Darkness flooded him. He was back in his father’s house, staring at the body of the only woman who had been kind of him. Vitreous had used a blade, rather than the lightsaber so the death had been slow. With her last breath she looked at Jhonnen with hate. Hate because this had been his fault.

Jhonnen began to sob, dropping to his knees and trying vainly to cover his eyes.

He was scared. He was scared the way children get scared. With the fear as an all encompassing blanket around him.

Enough humiliations. You will join us soon.

Again he felt someone touch his shoulder as the fear cleared and turned his face up to see Quinn standing protectively over him.

Jhonnen stood and cleared his throat. “We need to hit them now, before their strength recovers.”

When the last Dread Master was dead, Jhonnen relaxed, dropping his shoulders and exhaling as the miasma of fear lifted and dissipated. As they walked slowly back to the speeders, Jhonnen let Quinn tend to his injuries. He gave Katsulas a slow smile. “We make a surprisingly good team.”

“We do,” Katsulas agreed. “It’s a shame we won’t have more of an excuse to act as one.”

“We would if you would just defect,” Kira said, holding her head high.

Jhonnen shook his head, more for Quinn’s benefit that for anything else. “I can’t. The Empire is
my home.”

It wasn’t. It would never be.

But Quinn wouldn’t abandon it and if Jhonnen left the Dark Council would take it out on Quinn. He couldn’t let that happen.

They took their speeders back to the Imperial camp and walked over to where Hargrave was staring in amazement. He bowed low when Jhonnen made his way over. “The madness is gone. I can feel it. I can feel it!”

“The Dread Masters are dead,” Jhonnen confirmed.

Maiya smiled a little, but only a little. “The Dread Guard are falling back. We should target any surviving clusters.”

Hargrave shook his head, still beaming. “Learn to celebrate, Maiya.” He looked back at Jhonnen. “You… were inside. What was it like? Were you… tempted at all? To live as a union of fear, without mortal inhibition…”

“Nope,” Jhonnen said decisively. “Not even a little bit.”

Hargrave nodded his approval.

“We’re getting strategic updates from Darth Marr,” said Maiya. “Border sectors where he needs reinforcements.”

“And so the bloodshed must continue.” Hargrave shook his head. “At least the cancer in the Sith is gone. The Empire is a healthy body once again.”

Jhonnen didn’t believe that, and he didn’t have to turn his head to know Kira was rolling her eyes.

“Your final instructions for Oricon?”

“Burn the Dread Master’s knowledge to the ground,” Jhonnen said. There is nothing for us to gain here. The Republic forces are free to go.”

“Yes, my lord,” Hargrave bowed. “We live and die in your master’s name. Glory to the Emperor.”

Quinn saluted.

“Now come, Maiya. We have much work to do… and our friend has much more.”

Hargrave and Maiya left to enact Jhonnen’s will and Jhonnen turned to Kira and Katsulas. “Will you guys be able to get off this rock by yourselves?”

Katsulas nodded. “We have a landing beacon. Once we activate it, our ship will come collect us.”

“How are you getting home?” Kira asked.

Jhonnen gestured to the shuttle behind him. “I’m a little surprised no one stole it, to be honest.” He looked at Kira. “This is goodbye again, isn’t it?”

She nodded. And then she moved forward and curled her arms around him, inviting him to hold her back.
“Take care of yourself,” she said softly.

“Yeah. You too. Don’t the the Jedi get you into too much trouble.” He crushed her in his arms.

*I’ll miss you,* he said through the Force bond, willing her to feel how much he meant it.

*I’ll miss you too,* she replied.

They parted and Jhonnen and Quinn headed for their shuttle. Once on board, Quinn manned the helm.

“That must have been weird,” Jhonnen said, “Me and Kira, I mean.”

“I’m mostly just curious about how you know her, my lord. I trust you’d not defect without telling me.”

“Yeah, obviously, and I’m not keen on joining the Republic as is.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I am a pureblood sith. You don’t get many of us in Republic space. But I’ve known Kira since I was a kid.”

“Understood, my lord. Where has Vette taken the ship?”

Jhonnen pulled out his comm. “Hey, Vette.”

“Hey,” Vette said materializing in his palm. “You guys done?”

Jhonnen nodded. “Can you swing back around and pick us up?”

“Yeah sure, you alright? You look rough.”

Jhonnen shrugged one shoulder. “I just need a nap,” he told her. “This whole thing was a nightmare.”

“I’ll be there soon, then you can nap.”

“Thanks Vette. You’re the best.”
Jhonnen is forced to cut his vacation short when the newest head of the Sphere of Military Offense has a job for him.

Manaan, in Jhonnen’s opinion, was the polar opposite of Nar Shaddaa. Where Nar Shaddaa was always just a little bit dirty under the glitz and neon, Manaan was sterile. The architecture was sloping and regal, as opposed to Nar Shaddaa where everything was kind of square. The government was legitimate and a little overbearing instead of basically being ‘because this Hutt said so and can kill your loved ones’. Jhonnen wasn’t sure he liked Manaan, and he was positive he didn’t fit in, but the Whitecap Spa was nice and even Quinn seemed to be relaxing and that was what really mattered.

Jhonnen was in a hot tub for the first time in his life and he was never, ever, going to leave. Heat relaxed the muscles that were always tense: his feet, his hands, his shoulders. The water bubbled and frothed around him. Just before this a woman had put hot rocks on his spine to melt away the pain in his back.

He hadn’t even realized how badly he’d hurt until he didn’t anymore.

“Room for one more?”

He looked up and smiled at Vette, scooting over like he was making room when there was already plenty. “There’s room for you and Quinn.”

“Captain No-Fun in a hot tub, that’d be the day.” Vette unwrapped her towel revealing a simple white bathing suit that matched his simple white bathing trunks, and she slid in beside him.

“This has been great, Jhonny,” she told him.

“I did say we’d take a vacation,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “And the Cloudside Resort you wanted to visit sadly no longer exists.”

She chuckled, lekku relaxed. “What can you do?” She scooted closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. “Can I ruin the moment?”

“Sure,” Jhonnen answered, a little worried but not in the habit of denying anything she wanted to say.

“Are you doing alright?”

Jhonnen tilted his head so his ear touched the top of her lekku. “Yeah, this is wonderful.”

Her lekku twitched, but positioned as he was, Jhonnen couldn’t read them. “I mean about… Kira.” Vette said, hesitating before the name like bringing it up would break the resort’s magic spell.

Jhonnen withdrew, straightening up and pulling deeper inside himself. “Not really but… more than I thought I’d be,” he answered. “I accept it but… I love her and I know she loves me but I’m…"
Sith. I’m everything she hates. Everything I hate. But I have to be Sith.” To protect what really mattered. To survive. “But she doesn’t hate me and we’ll… figure it out if the Jedi send her after me. But none of that changes that we’re on opposite sides of a galactic conflict.”

Vette found his hand in the water and set her hand on top of his. “Come on, Jhonny. If you weren’t Sith, we never would have met, remember? I don’t like Sith either but you’re not like most of them. You’re fun, you’re kind.”

Jhonnen swallowed. “I know who I’d be without you, Vette, and I hate that person.” He wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her that she was the only thing that made the distance with Kira bearable. He wanted to tell her that she was the best thing to ever happen to him. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, even if he didn’t know what kind of love it was because it was every kind. “You’re my best friend, Vette. I mean that.”

“You’re my best friend too.” Vette squeezed his hand. “I’m just worried because you’ve been moping since we left Makeb.”

“I’ll probably keep moping,” Jhonnen shrugged. “But it doesn’t mean I’ve lost track of what’s… here.”

“Good.” She pulled her hand away and leaned back. “We can resume enjoying our vacation now, serious stuff over.”

Jhonnen leaned back and focused on the water. He wondered if it was kolto infused.

“So, think about Cytharat much?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m glad he’s recovered and sorry he’s posted to Makeb again but… not really.”

“I thought you had feelings for him.”

“What made you think… oh, the kiss.” Jhonnen looked at the cloudless Manaan sky. “It was nice but I didn’t know him well enough for feelings. He’s very… serious. And wholly dedicated to an empire I hate. The kiss was nice though.”

Vette considered this and then nodded like she approved. “I shoulda told Taunt you’d never been kissed, she’d have had a field day.”

“What?”

Vette shrugged. “She thinks you’re cute—for a Sith lord. It wouldn’t have gone anywhere,”—here was a thread of hope when she said it—“but she’s probably a better kisser than Cytharat.”

“What makes you say that?”

Vette shrugged and did not answer. Jhonnen accepted that.

In short order they were joined by Quinn, to their surprise. He had on the same white shorts that Jhonnen did and gave a short salute. “Forgive my, my lord, I didn’t realize the tub was occupied.”

“There’s room for three.”

Quinn eyed Vette like he’d rather not but Jhonnen rolled his eyes and Quinn lowered himself obediently into the water. “Do you know where we’re going after this reprieve, my lord?” Quinn
Jhonnen shrugged. “Someone will have an idea when I turn my comm back on I’m certain.”

“You turned your comm off?” Quinn asked, concerned.

“I left the emergency channel open, but I’m on vacation. I needed a break after Makeb and we didn’t even get to do this immediately because of the whole… thing on Oricon, and then I had to go support one of Marr’s fleets. The Dark Council can get along without me for a week.”

Moff Broysc had been on R&R when Quinn had captured him.

“But, the emergency channels are open and the comm is near at hand. If something needs my attention, it’ll be dealt with. I’m not neglecting the conflict, the Dark Council is just arguing over where to deploy us.” Jhonnen smiled. “For now, just enjoy the spa, we need to be in top condition for whatever we’re doing next.”

“Yes, my lord,” Quinn bobbed his head obediently, “I believe you’ve covered all of my concerns.”

After an hour of balancing the conversation between Quinn and Vette, Jhonnen got out of the hot tub and towed off. He wrapped the towel around his waist and headed back to his room to change into real clothes. He picked a small blue fruit off of the fruit basket that had been in his room when they’d first arrived and checked his comm.

The little red light was flashing, Jhonnen’s heart sank. Still, as dutifully as if Quinn was watching, Jhonnen turned on his comm and played the message. An automated voice began to speak. “The Jedi Order has committed a grave error, and the time has come to strike. In recognition of your past victories, you will lead this assault. Proceed to Vaiken Spacedock and locate astromech droid A7-M1. Make sure you are not followed.”

And there went their vacation. Jhonnen called Quinn and Vette and told them to meet him at the ship while he settled their bill. There was grumbling, exclusively from Vette, and Jhonnen went to the front counter, holding his fruit basket because he didn’t want to waste it. He paid their bill, trying not to think about the number of zeros, and then headed to the landing pad to board his ship.

Quinn was making pre-flight checks. Vette was in the engine room. Jhonnen headed to his room and set the fruit basket down.

They left Manaan behind.

Jhonnen went alone to find astromech A7-M1. He wasn’t stealthy generally, not as stealthy as he’d been in his early youth, but he knew how to walk casually. He found the astromech in question and cleared his throat, letting it scan him to confirm his identity.

<< Sentient = scanned // Sentient = recognized // A7-M1 = honored to greet Imperial legend. >>

“Uh… thanks,” Jhonnen said, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

<< Wrath = prepare for incoming transmission // Darth Arkous = Dark Council member // Darth Arkous + you = great allies! >>

A holo of Darth Arkous—head of the sphere of Military Offense since the whole thing with Malgus—appeared. He was a slender pureblood of more or less average height wearing black robes with white highlights and he smiled broadly to see Jhonnen. “So, you’re the one the Emperor
chose as his Wrath. Well past time we’ve had a proper talk, I should think.”

Jhonnen gave an unsure bob of his head. As Dark Councillors went, and he was on shakily okay ground with Vowrawn and he respected and tolerated Marr, but really he wanted the leaders of the Empire to leave him alone.

They wouldn’t, and Arkous had more need of him than anyone else just do to Jhonnen’s martial prowess, but still, he didn’t like it.

“That depends on what you wanted to talk about,” Jhonnen said

“You represent the last, most vital piece in my plan to shake the Republic to its very core,” Arkous said dramatically. “I’d say more, but it’s better we speak in person. I promise you, together we will change the face of the galaxy”—Arkous’s smile because quite cruel—“Starting with the planet Tython.”

The transmission ended and the astromech beeped at Jhonnen once more, sending coordinates to his datapad. << Docking bay coordinates = transmitted // You = see Darth Arkous now // A7-M1 mission = complete. >>

The little machine rolled away.

Jhonnen checked his datapad for the coordinates and headed down to one of the station’s docking bays. He followed the instructions to a small office just off the hangar and the guard let him through.

Arkous was pacing in front of a table console. Working on the console was a very short human woman with her blonde hair in a bob around her ears and sitting off to one side was a stoic looking chagrian who had carved spiral patterns onto his horns.

All told, a cheery looking bunch.

The woman brought up a hologram of Tython.

Jhonnen went to clear his throat when Arkous started talking. “If I could carry a tune, I would sing of this day,” Arkous said grandly. “What we are about to accomplish, the galaxy will forever behold with great wonderment.”

Jhonnen, unimpressed, cocked his brow and waited to be acknowledged.

Arkous and the blonde woman turned. Arkous smiled. “But perhaps I’m getting ahead of myself. After all, we’ve never properly met.”

Jhonnen inclined his head just a little, just enough to be polite without being subservient. “Darth Arkous.”

“Darth Volens,” Arkous said, mirroring Jhonnen’s nod. “A pleasure. In my capacity as Minister of Military Offense, I have repeatedly enjoyed the fruits of your labor.” He gestured to the blonde woman. “And this is my most trusted advisor, Lana Beniko.”


Lana gave a shallow bow. “So much strength I sense in you. After all the trials you’ve endured, to stand here now is quite and achievement.”
Jhonnen slammed his mental defenses down. She’s picked up too much. Whatever she knew about his ‘trials’ was more than he wanted people to know about his trials. She might see Jaesa or Vette or even Quinn. She might see how he’d cost the Empire Corellia.

“You have good instincts,” Jhonnen said, trying to sound like this was a good thing. “You must be strong in the Force indeed.”

“Yes,” Lana said without a trace of false modesty. “I’m fortunate in that regard.” She folded her hands respectfully in front of herself. “You’ve been invited here to perform an act once thought impossible: an attack on the Jedi Temple of Tython.”

Jhonnen stared at her and waged a silent, private war. He couldn’t very well refuse or there would be questions of why he’d refused. On the other and very valid hand, he couldn’t sack the Jedi Temple. Kira would kill him.

But if he went he could maybe mitigate the damage. Maybe limit the loss of life.

He could try, at least.

He had to try.

“Promising leads have been rare ever since Imperial Intelligence was effectively dismantled. However I source I personally trust has alerted me to a hole in Tython’s planetary defenses.” Arkous said. “If we act fact and strike hard, it will absolutely ruin Republic morale. Annihilated it.”

“Do we have a plan for holding the temple?” Please say no, please say no.

Lana Beniko nodded. “While you concern yourself with the assault, Lord Goh will be tasked with keeping the Temple secured. So long as we have control, we’ll explore the artifact and histories stored inside. Imagine all we can learn about the Jedi and the Force.”

“Could be fascinating,” Jhonnen said, still trying to think of a way out so he never had to explain to Kira that he sacked the Jedi Temple.

“Your shuttle awaits,” Lana Beniko said. “By the time you reach Tython, our first wave will have established a foothold on the surface. I’ll remain in constant contact throughout the offensive.”

“Succeed in this,” said Arkous, dramatically, and we will have signalled the beginning of the Republic’s most humiliating end. Glory! For the Empire!”

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes. Arkous was almost… too gung ho about this. It felt like a facade.

But a facade for what?

He pulled out his comm as he headed for the shuttle bay. “Vette?”

“Yeah?”

“Get your kit together and meet me on level five, by the shuttles. Tell Quinn to see about repairs and upgrades for the Tide and we’ll try to be back before too long.”

Quinn would prefer to strike such a blow against the Republic, but Jhonnen needed to mitigate damages, and that meant he needed Vette.

“Something happening?” Vette asked.
Jhonnen nodded. “We’re sacking the Jedi Temple. I’ll explain more when I have the chance.”

He waited near the shuttle until Vette showed up. She looked at the other Imperials and gave a low bow. “My lord.”

Jhonnen nodded, hating it, and stepped onto the shuttle, Vette taking a seat at his side.

He had a long time to stew on the flight, unable to talk to Vette about what had happened and what was happening. And needling in to his worries about what he was going to say to Kira, came the worries about Vette’s low bow.

He loved her and she… she liked him. But no one in the Empire would ever see them as a union of equals. They would see him taking advantage of having a beautiful slave. They wouldn’t see that he loved her and even if they did, they wouldn’t care because he was Sith and she was a twi’lek with burn scars on the back of her neck. They wouldn’t see the friendship, a friendship that had been built over the course of five years into something stronger than cortosis. They wouldn’t see how they supported each other. The Empire would just see Jhonnen’s devotion as a weakness to be purged.

And that power imbalance meant that the right thing to do was to never, ever, act on his feelings for Vette.

And that sucked.

Jhonnen’s boots touched down on Tython in springy grass next to a river. Jhonnen listened to the sound of combat and took advantage of it to take Vette’s elbow and hold her while he spoke in a low voice. “Try to mitigate damage where you can. If you can wound, do it.”

“Alright.” Vette nodded. “How’re you going to explain this to Kira?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Fuck if I know, but I’ll figure something out.”

Vette nudged him affectionately and they dove into seizing the Temple, fighting their way first to turn off the shielding around the Temple and then up the Temple steps where they first faced a Jedi Master and some droids, and then faced a surge of Jedi Padawans.

There was no good way to fight non-lethally with a lightsaber unless you enjoyed carving off limbs. In one on one fights, Jhonnen could just unignite one lightsaber, use his second for defense and focus on hitting someone in the head enough times to stop them. With a group, Jhonnen was forced to defend from multiple angles and protect Vette. He couldn’t afford to use non-lethal means.

They got into the Temple, and Jhonnen’s heart almost broke. He didn’t generally care about Jedi knowledge, but a massive holocron had been suspended and was now collapsed in the center of the room, taking out half of one of the two sloping ramps that lead up to the second story.

Vette and Jhonnen hurried upstairs, faced with more Republic commandos that were blocking the way to a handful of generators that were set up at the back of what looked like a meeting room. Jhonnen and Vette destroyed the generators and, poking their heads out of the meeting room to look around, found that they had been powering the force field protecting the library.

Jhonnen took a breath. Vette, noting that they were the only Imperials in sight, curled her arm around his wrist. “It’s almost over. Final push.”
“Final push,” Jhonnen agreed.

They headed to the library and a nautolan male, broad shouldered and wearing simple brown robes, unfurled from where he had been sitting. “As if it wasn’t enough to sense your presence, you seem to have a need to do everything as loudly as possible.” The nautolan ignited a green lightsaber. “This is the Jedi Temple. You are not welcome. Leave this sacred place—now. You’ll not get a second warning.”

“Please, surrender,” Jhonnen pleaded. “The less bloodshed, the better.”

The Jedi snorted with disdain. “You’ve had your chance to retreat. Now you’ll learn why I’m the High Council’s chief combat advisor. If you won’t go willingly, you leave me no choice!”

The Jedi lunged forward, slicing at Jhonnen’s chest. Jhonnen dove in front of Vette, blocking the slash with one lightsaber and kicking the older man in the chest.

Vette fired from over Jhonnen’s shoulder, taking advantage of the couple inch difference in their height. The Jedi deflected the onslaught, bouncing the blaster bolts back into Jhonnen, who was forced to devote himself entirely to his guard.

Their usual strategy of harry and distract wasn’t going to work here. They needed another plan and they needed another plan fast.

The Jedi Battlemaster began to try and channel and Jhonnen’s saw an opening. He dove forward, closing the distance between them and interrupting the other man’s attempt to channel. Jhonnen fought to stay in grappling distance, figuring that the older man had more lightsaber training under his belt and that it had been a while since someone had just punched him in the face.

Jhonnen dragged his opponent to the ground and bit and clawed at him, craning his neck back at the last second to avoid gouging fingers.

“Jhonnen!” Vette shouted. Something metallic slid on the ground over to him and he grabbed the vibroknife and jammed it into the Battlemaster’s chest.

Jhonnen pulled back and sat on his heels beside the corpse, blood going tacky on his palms. He was bruised and scratched, but okay.

Vette’s fingers sank into his hair and Jhonnen’s eyes rolled closed. “Thank you. I wasn’t aware you carried a vibroknife.”

“I got into the habit in case I needed to shank Quinn,” Vette admitted. “Kind of relieved it’s never come up.”

Jhonnen would have sat there with her fingers in his hair forever but he couldn’t. Eventually, someone would be along. He picked himself up off the floor and pulled the vibroblade out of the Battlemaster’s chest and wiped it on his pantleg before offering it back to Vette.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll clean it properly when we get a minute.”

Finished with the Jedi Battlemaster, Jhonnen and Vette went to access the holoterminal in the Jedi meeting room, listening as the Imperials secured the Temple. Lana Beniko appeared in pale blue. “Can you believe tech ops already remapped the secure comms? Talented slicers we have in our employ, though even they pale in comparison to you.”

“Uh, thanks…” Jhonnen said hesitantly, not trusting the flattery because he never trusted flattery.
from Sith. His attention was drawn by the sound of boots behind him and he turned in time to be saluted by one of the sergeants.

“Well, pardon the intrusion. I thought you’d want to know, the Jedi Temple is now fully under our control. We have a number of Jedi padawans in our custody, much be recent additions, they didn’t know the first thing about fighting. What would you have me do with them.”

Jhonnen looked past him to the frightened collection of teenagers and young adults. “Release them. They’re no threat to us.”

“As you wish, my lord.” The sergeant saluted and started to leave.

Just past him, Jhonnen spotted Goh in quiet conversation with Darth Arkous. His eyes narrowed but he turned around and returned to talking with Lana Beniko.

She gave him a thin smile. “The Temple and its mysteries are all ours now. Darth Arkous is indescribably pleased.”

“Uh-huh,” Jhonnen said. “He and Goh seem thick as thieves.”

“It’s no secret,” Beniko said. “With the Temple secure, Lord Goh has been tasked with uncovering any hidden information stores. On behalf of Darth Arkous, I thank you. This is a banner day for the Empire. Be proud.”

Jhonnen nodded, not feeling proud. He’d done what he could to mitigate what had happened and it hadn’t been enough.

He couldn’t even contact Kira and own up to it right away because he didn’t have her contact information.

This was going to be bad.

Vette settled next to him on the shuttle and discreetly knocked her knee against his.

They were an hour outside of Vaiken Space Dock when Jhonnen’s comm lit up. He held it up and saw Lana Beniko, her small mouth pursed to a frown.

“My lord, bad news. The Republic’s hit Korriban. I’m rerouting your shuttle immediately. Darth Arkous has demanded that the Republic commander be made an example of, that you should not take him prisoner.”

What are the odds? Jhonnen thought, nodding to Beniko. The odds are astronomical. But more than that, why wouldn’t we take the commander prisoner? Surely torture or whatever is more ‘make an example of them’ than just decapitating them.

Jhonnen’s boots hit Korriban’s red sand and he was hit with a wave of nauseated nostalghia. He had hated Korriban from the first moment Tremel had transferred him. He’d hated the dry cold air and the murder in the eyes of every other acolyte.

“Takes me back,” Vette said, holding her blasters up and at the ready. “Though to really get in the spirit of things I should be throwing rocks.”

“Nah,” Jhonnen said, headed down off the small landing site to start dealing with the Republic forces. “Should’ve had a blaster back when we were dealing with Vemrin, that would have made it
all go much faster."

She might have shot him in reality, but for the sake of the pleasant thought experiment, Vette was only shooting at his enemies.

Jhonnen and Vette proceeded to decimate the commanders left behind near the landing pad and then took a lift up to the training grounds properly.

Up where the lift dropped them, the sergeant who had gotten Jhonnen’s attention to deal with the padawans, waved him down again. “My lord,” he said, gesturing to a pen with a laser field across it. “These Sith apprentices were holed up in a medical supply storeroom. They’re injured—some of them seriously—but they’re able to walk, at least. You orders?”

Jhonnen considered. He held no affection for the average Sith apprentice. The average Sith apprentice was taught to be self-serving and cruel from an early age.

But many of them were teenagers or younger. And it wasn’t… it wasn’t really their fault at the moment.

“Get them to safety,” Jhonnen said flatly. “The way behind us is clear. Have someone prep a med-evac.”

“Yes of course. I’ll see to it personally.” The Sergeant deactivated the force field. “Move out, cowards! Now!”

Jhonnen almost objected, but he had things to do and he didn’t really care about the apprentices being browbeaten.

The wildlife itself had been worked up by the chaos. The ground at Jhonnen’s feet rumbled and he leapt backwards in time to avoid the maw of a k’lor’slug at it surged upwards. Jhonnen bisected it, listening as the rumbling intensified and more slugs popped out of the ground. Vette’s shoulder’s touched his as she fired behind them. Jhonnen leapt away and into the k’lor’slugs blocking their path.

“Let’s move!” Vette shouted, tearing past him. Jhonnen kept pace with her and then leapt ahead to land in the middle of a small pack of Republic troopers.

They fought their way up to the stone black building of the Sith academy, now a bombed out shell of itself in much the same way as the Jedi Temple had been. The difference was when Jhonnen had looked at the Jedi Temple, he’d felt a wave of sadness, when he looked at the Sith academy, he felt nothing at all.

They collected the parts of code from the Jedi Masters and headed up to the Dark Council chambers. A small part of Jhonnen hoped that Vowrawn or Ravage or Mortis or Marr or Acina was lying dead on the ground, but they were not.

And that was probably for the best, their replacements would almost certainly be worse.

Particularly for Marr or Vowrawn.

The sole living thing in the Dark Council chambers, was a tall, broad human with a lightsaber and a handful of floating droids.

Jhonnen kept his lightsabers ignited. “Hiya.”
“Don’t worry Sith; I have no intention of saying.”

“I’m not supposed to let you keep breathing, pal.”

The Jedi’s face fell a little. “So it’s happening. I didn’t think I’d have served my purpose so soon.”

“Uh… what?”

“We believe in a cause worth protecting—worth dying for. Let’s find out if you can say the same.”

“I can’t,” Jhonnen said dully. “But I’m going to kick your ass anyway.”

The Jedi commander lunged forward and Jhonnen juked to the said, drawing his attention away from Vette. Jhonnen blocked the assault, bringing his other lightsaber up and forcing the Jedi back.

On the other side of the room, Vette fired at the droids, putting them out of commission until she was forced back behind one of the tall black chairs. “Jhonnen!”

Jhonnen leapt away from the commander and landed in front of the droid while Vette let her blasters cool down. He sliced the droid open until he heard a scream and spun to find Vette hovering in midair. Jhonnen darted forward, blocking the kill stroke from the Jedi commander and fighting him back, shattering his concentration so Vette was dropped and could start firing, harrying the commander with blaster fire until Jhonnen stuck his lightsaber through the man’s ribs and kicked him to the floor.

“It’s happening,” the Jedi muttered, pushing himself up on one arm and clutching the lightsaber hole in his side. “It’s all happening, and you can’t stop it…”


“No point threatening a dead man,” said the Jedi. He took a deep breath and keeled over. Jhonnen stared at the corpse for a long moment, annoyed at how cryptic he’d been. Still, there was nothing for it now and Jhonnen used the holoterminal in the back of the room to contact Lana Beniko.

“And with that,” she said, flickering into view. “The Sith Academy is secure. I suppose saying ‘good work’ would constitute a gross understatement.”


“I’m sure Darth Arkous would like to hear about it. He’s eager to offer up his congratulations in person.”

“Same place on Vaiken Space Dock?”

“Yes,” Ms. Beniko nodded. “You’ve really come through for the Empire. There is much for us to thank you for, and much yet to discuss; I hope we see you soon.”

Jhonnen and Vette walked back to the shuttle, and her knuckles bumped into the back of his hand. Automatically, Jhonnen took her hand, gave it a small squeeze, and pulled away.

Once they were aboard the shuttle, he leaned back. “Once we land, head back to the ship and let Quinn know why we’re late,” he instructed, “I’ll meet with Darth Arkous and Ms. Beniko.”

“Ms?” Vette asked.

“She’s not a Lord, apparently.”
“Weird.”

“I know, right?”

They docked with the space station and Vette headed for the hangar where The Sanguine Tide and Quinn were waiting while Jhonnen went down a couple of floors and into the office with Darth Arkous and Lana Beniko were waiting.

“It’s finished,” Jhonnen said.

Darth Arkous bowed, lower that a Dark Councilor should. “You have served the Empire with strength and passion. I applaud you.”

“Thanks…” Jhonnen said stretching the word out a little. “What now?”

“I want to be sure you understand that what you’ve accomplished—both on Korriban and on Tython—will long be remembered. Everyone will look back on these days as the nascent events that framed a new foundation for the galaxy. They will see those who participated as its architects.”

Jhonnen held up a hand. “I’m pretty sure propaganda is either Marr’s job or Ravage’s job. You don’t need to keep making speeches at me.”

“Mm,” Arkous rubbed his chin. “It’s become a habit, I’m afraid. Comes from years of speaking to the easily led and the utterly stupid.” He shook his head and lowered his hand. “You, of course, are neither. Lana and I are indebted to you for your exemplary actions in the Empire’s name. We thank you.”

Lana gave Jhonnen a slightly mysterious smile, one that didn’t reach her yellow-gold eyes. “Yes, thank you. I do hope we have the chance to speak again. Preferably soon.”

Arkous brought up a fist. “Glory for the Empire!”

Jhonnen nodded to the pair of Sith and left. He got most of the way back to the hangar where his ship and crew were waiting, when Lana spoke in his ear, the same way she had during the operations on Tython and Korriban. “Lord Wrath. This is Lana Beniko. I need you to meet with me—somewhere private. You may be the Empire’s only hope.”

Jhonnen groaned. He wanted nothing so much as to ignore her. He didn’t care about the fate of the Empire. He cared about a small handful of people who happened to mostly live in the Empire and he was done with Arkous’s bullshit. The speeches, the rhetoric, the lies. Arkous was up to something and while that could be said of every Dark Councillor, Jhonnen felt that Arkous had used him.

And that was annoying.

Jhonnen thought about Quinn, and what Quinn would say if Jhonnen had allowed harm to come to his precious Empire and then Jhonnen sighed. “Where do you want to meet?”

“The Fleet Cantina, ten minutes.”

Jhonnen changed his comm frequency and called the ship. “I’ll be a little late. Sorry.”

“Everything alright, my lord?” asked Quinn at the helm.

“Yeah, just meeting a woman for drinks,” he tried to sound roguish and had no idea how it’d gone
over. “Wait for me.”

“Of course, my lord,”

The call ended and Jhonnen headed to the fleet cantina, a place that only constituted *private* because it was usually so busy that no one could overhear anything. Jhonnen got a corellian whiskey and a back booth, and sat there nursing his drink slowly while he waited for Lana Beniko.

“You came. Good.” She lowered herself into the other side of the booth. “I’m aware I’ve been somewhat quiet following your success on Tython. Don’t mistake my reticence for apathy. Truth is, I have a great deal to say. Now that we’re alone, we can have a real dialogue.”

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes. One of two things was happening. Either Lana had noticed how damn squirrelly Darth Arkous was being or this was a trap set by Arkous.

What reason Arkous had to trap him, Jhonnen wasn’t sure. But Arkous was a Dark Council member and therefore he was liable to have several schemes running at once.

Jhonnen raised a brow, inviting her to continue without saying anything himself.

“Darth Arkous wasn’t entirely forthcoming about his reasons for invading the Jedi Temple,” Lana said. “Not even with me. He was after a very specific item. An artifact.”

“Uh-huh,” Jhonnen said. “Well, he was acting plenty fucking squirrelly, so let’s say I believe you.”

“If I knew more, I could determine what his motive is. There’s very good reason to be concerned about it.”

“That so,” Jhonnen said dryly.

Lana nodded. “I know believe that the Republic’s attack on Korriban wasn’t a retaliation for Tython. It was intended to coincide with our own attack.”

*The timing was too perfect,* Jhonnen thought. He nodded his agreement.

“A wider context may exist that could explain recent events… There’s something in the Force that I’ve never felt before. It exists nowhere and everywhere at once. Writing, growing.”

“I sense nothing of the sort,” Jhonnen said. Though admittedly, that probably didn’t mean much.

“I think I sense this *growth* because I’m tied to it somehow, maybe by association to Darth Arkous. I think… I think the Empire’s in terrible danger. I’m far from weak, but I’m only one Sith. Whatever’s coming, I can’t stop it alone, Wrath.”

“On the other hand, this could all be a trap Darth Arkous has set up,” Jhonnen said. “Dark Councillors are tricky and I did have a hand in deposing three heads of the Sphere of Military Offense. Recently, even.”

Lana frowned, but nodded. “If my word isn’t enough, I suppose I’ll have to prove it to you. Whatever I find, I’ll let you know as soon as I can. Stay vigilant, and may the Force ever serve you.”

She left and Jhonnen finished his whiskey before heading back to the hangar and exhaled once he was aboard *The Sanguine Tide.* “I’m home,” he hollered. “Quinn, take us back to Dromund Kaas.”

“At once, my lord,” said Quinn who had this magical ability to never sound like he was yelling
even when he was.

Jhonnen headed into the lounge and smiled at Vette.

“Was she cute?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “Not that it matters, but yes, Ms. Beniko is pretty cute. She wanted to talk about a threat to the Empire.”

“What kind of threat?”

“Darth Arkous, apparently. Though she’d not sure how and I’m not sure I trust her. She said she’ll present me with proof when she has any.”

Vette nodded. She stretched upwards and gave a theatrical yawn. “I feel like going to bed. Coming?”

Jhonnen chuckled. “Of course.”

They headed back into Jhonnen’s bed room and Vette dropped the act once the door was closed. “What do you make of it?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I don’t care that the Empire might be in danger, but I do care about Quinn finding that out.” He flopped over on the bed and smiled when Vette joined him on the mattress. “So if she brings me proof, I’ll deal with it. If she doesn’t, this is over and we get a bit of a vacation before the next crisis.”

“That’d be nice.” Vette curled up on her side, on hand resting on his chest to feel the beat of his heart. “We could visit another resort.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”
Jhonnen meets Lana Beniko on Manaan to try and uncover more of Darth Arkous’s conspiracy.

“My lord,” Quinn said into the intercom. “A message has just come through on an encrypted channel. The signature is L. B. Again”

Beniko’s last message had been ponderous, but proved that she was seriously looking into things.

“Put it through to my datapad,” Jhonnen said, opening his eyes from where he’d been meditating in the sparring room, surrounded by droid scrap. He picked himself up and walked over to his vest, shoes and datapad to check the message. It was simplistic: a docking platform on Manaan and a room to meet in.

Manaan made it interesting. The planet was violently neutral, enough so that offworlders were only ever welcome on a single trade platform that also held the galactically acclaimed Whitecap Resort. The chances of an ambush on Manaan were remote.

He pulled his boots back on and headed to the cockpit. “Quinn, lay in a course for Manaan. While we’re there, take care of our kolto stores with Vette.”

“And you, my lord?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “A contact of mine believes she’s found a threat to the Empire so I’m going to meet with her and get to the bottom of it.”

“We’ll be available if you need us,” Quinn promised.

Jhonnen grinned at him. “I’m counting on it.”

They landed on the artificial island offworlders were allowed on and Jhonnen went to find Lana Beniko. She was waiting for him in a crisp and sterile conference room, and she gave him a polite but not deferential tilt of her head in greeting.

“What have you found?” Jhonnen asked.

Lana folded her hands in front of her. “As implied in our last, brief communication, Darth Arkous is at the center of a grand conspiracy.”

Jhonnen nodded that she should continue.

“Arkous had the Jedi Temple raided to acquire knowledge of Rakata technology that he could use to harm the Empire. Even now, he plots against us.”

Well, that was more information than she’d had last time.

But she looked… worn. She hid it well, but it was there. He remembered what she’d said in her
first letter, *If I am right, I have lost a close ally. If I am wrong, my instincts have become deeply flawed.*

He didn’t *like* her, but that was… a lot. More than she should have to deal with.

“How’re you holding up?” he asked, the mask of The Wrath slipping just a little bit.

“He had me fooled for sometime,” Lana said professionally. “But I see his true face now. I’ve followed Arkous to a secure undersea laboratory here on Manaan, where he’s working with a Selkath geneticist on… something. I’ve been trying to learn more.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“I’ve *also* discovered that Colonel Darok secured passage to the same laboratory.”

Jhonnen gave her a blank look at the name.

“He was behind the Republic’s raid on Korriban,” she explained.

“Given the timing of the two attacks, they’re probably in league. I don’t think Arkous has *defected*, or why bother hitting Tython, but I think they’re up to something together.”

“That’s my feeling as well,” Lana said with a small nod. “But we won’t know for certain unless we get into that laboratory. As I said, it’s a well-protected facility. You’ll have to make your way through heavily armed Selkath and dismantle their security grid.”

“Uh, two things,” Jhonnen said, holding up two fingers. “Won’t that cause all Imperial interests to get booted offplanet if the *Wrath* is discovered to be ransacking Selkath interests and, two, why does it sound like you’re not coming.”

“Don’t get caught,” Lana said, the ghost of a smile on her mouth. “And I’d intended to confront Darth Arkous myself, but I sense a presence here—a potential ally. I’ll remain in touch and let you know how my search progresses. May the Force be at your service.”

Jhonnen shrugged and produced his comm, switching to Vette’s holofrequency. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I need you to meet me at these coordinates. We’re going to go make mistakes.”

“Mistakes,” Vette said dryly. “Love it. Be right there.”

He lowered his comm and found Lana studying him curiously.

“My right hand,” he explained. “We have a casual relationship.”

“I see,” Lana said.

They waited in awkward silence for Vette to show up and when she did, she shot a glance at Lana and then gave a low bow. “You summoned, my lord?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “She heard the holocall, we’re in the clear.” Or he would *deal* with Lana. He looked back to Lana. “I assume you’ve arranged transportation?”

“Yes,” Lana nodded her head and produced her datapad, sending the information to Jhonnen’s.
He nodded and headed to the submersibles with Vette on his heels.

“Have I ever told you that I have a fear of dying from the intense pressures of the deep sea?” Vette asked as they disembarked the submersible.

“Funny,” Jhonnen said, igniting his lightsabers, “I also have a fear of you dying from the intense pressures of the deep sea.” He leapt forward as the Selkath guards came to check the submersible that had docked. He cut them down before they could reach for their comms while Vette shot out the camera.

“Can’t this get all the Imperials kicked off Manaan?” Vette asked.

“If we get caught? Yes, probably.”

“Why are we down here then?”

“Arkous is shady, we’re down here to discover exactly what brand of shady he is and stop him if we can.”

“Fun,” Vette said dryly.

“This is why I brought you instead of Quinn,” Jhonnen said, turning a corner and throwing his lightsaber to bisect a Selkath.

“Also you like me more than you like Quinn.”

“Also I like you more than I like Quinn, and I like Quinn. He’s just not…” Jhonnen cleared his throat because he absolutely could not end that sentence with ‘my Vette’ because she would eviscerate him with mockery and, seeing as she’d been treated as property for most of her life, she might not appreciate the implied possession.

Vette cocked an eyebrow at him and, rather than bear the brunt of her scrutiny, Jhonnen hurried along the corridor, deeper into the laboratory.

“I’ve met our potential ally, who’s already proven quite resourceful,” Lana said in his ear. “He’s learned of a prisoner in the security hub who’s been scheduled for disposal by experimentation. This ‘Jakarro’ sounds like someone you might want to talk with—as soon as you contend with the head of security.”

The head of security was accompanied by two droids. Jhonnen sprang into them, using the Force to send one droid into another and put them both between him and the security chief. Vette, behind a table, fired harassing shots to distract while Jhonnen wove between all three of his opponents. When they hit the ground he heard boots and pivoted in time to watch Vette pepper a security team with blaster fire.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Vette said, coming over to him. As a team they turned their attention to the cage on one side of the room. The resident was an annoyed looking wookie wearing a droid’s head. Looking around, Jhonnen found a bowcaster in a box. He walked back over to the cage and gave a small wave. “Hiya.”

The droid’s eyes flashed an a metallic voice announced estastically. “We’re rescued!”
<< Stupid droid! >> warbled the wookie, Jakarro, presumably. << This one does not look like any liberator. >>

Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest. “Hey! That’s racist.”

The droid’s eyes flashed again. “Jakarro! My most sincere apologies for his outburst. Please don’t leave us here to rot; I implore you!”

<< Do not speak for me when I have not spoken, or I will shut you off forever! >>

Vette, standing at Jhonnen’s elbow, tilted her head curiously. “Huh.”

<< Introduce us! >>

The droid’s eyes flashed and he said, with almost wicked delight. “I am Ceetoo Deefour, former translator to Her Imminence, Queen Lina of Onderon; and this is my current master, the renowned illicit-transport specialist Jakarro.”

Vette crossed her arms over her chest. “So a smuggler, in other words.”

“Jakarro was hired, quite innocuously, by a Selkath geneticist named Gorima,” explained the droid. “We delivered a large shipment of perfectly legal medical supplies here, to this facility. Imagine out consternation when Gorima then had us imprisoned and interrogated most harshly by two awful creatures!”

<< An Imp Sith and a Pub. I told them the truth, but they scheduled us for Gorima’s experiments anyway. >>

Jhonnen deprogrammed the cage and stepped back as Jakarro stepped down. “Pretty sure I know those guys, well, one of those guys. Nasty piece of work. But this proves they’re in cahoots.”

Which did… what, exactly? Jhonnen was pretty sure this wasn’t a simple defection scenario or why would they have hit Tython. It was complicated and Jhonnen didn’t like it.

“Is that significant?” asked the droid.

Jakarro shook his great, maned head. << Imps and Pubs in a secret alliance, droid! I have a bad feeling about this. So does this Imp. You have come to stop the Pub and the Imp, have you not? >>

Jhonnen sighed. “Well I’m not here for the pillow fights that’s for damn sure.”

Vette snorted.

<< I want a chance at revenge on my captors. >>

Jhonnen nodded. “You’re welcome to tag along then.” He gestured towards the door at the far end of the room, the one that led deeper into the facility.

“Nice to see you’ve made a new friend—or friends, as it were.” Lana said in his ear. “But a warning: You’re about to encounter members of the Order of Shasa—Force-sensitive Selkay who are neither Jedi nor Sith. Their complicity here does not bode well for us.”

Jhonnen sighed, “goodie,” and turned to face Vette, giving her a crooked smile. “Force users up ahead. Probably going to get messy from here on out.”

“Fun,” Vette complained. She side-eyed Jakarro and then thought better of whatever else she might
Continuing into the facility, Jhonnen noticed a menacing outline in the distance and, by staring, alerted Vette to it.

“Sharks, awesome,” Vette said with a frown. “I ever tell you I have a fear of being eaten?”

“Funny,” Jhonnen said, wanting nothing more than to squeeze her hand or her shoulder in comfort. “I also have a fear of you being eaten.”

Jakarro harumphed and shouldered past them. Once his back was too them, Vette knocked her elbow into Jhonnen’s and gave him a small smile.

“Our ally just made note of strange power signatures in your vicinity.” Lana said in his ear. “He believes they may be emanating from Rakata technology. It warrants a closer look. Tap into a nearby console so we can investigate.”

“We need to hit a console in the next room,” Jhonnen said. “Lana needs information about some resident Rakata tech.”

They turned the corner and Jhonnen deflected the droids blaster fire away from Vette and back at the source. When he spotted members of the Order of Shasa, Jhonnen left Vette, leaping forwards and engaging all of them at once, he blocked and parried and knocked them down one by one before looking at the obviously-not-Selkath artifact and plugging Lana into the console it was connected to.

He wondered if this was the artifact taken from the Jedi Temple or the Sith Academy.

…”

And probably if he was wondering that. There was another console.

They hunted around for a second console and found it next to another suspiciously not-Selkath artifact.

“Hi,” a man said in Jhonnen’s ear. Republic, from the sound of it. Kind of a cute voice, actually. “You don’t know me, but I’m here with Lana. She’s meditating, using her connection to Darth Arkous to pinpoint his location. She wanted you to know if I found anything, and I did. Energy readings from Gorima’s lab. Rakata technology’s firing up like crazy in there. Don’t know for sure what’s going on, but I can pretty much guarantee it’s got to be stopped.”

“Lana’s made a friend,” Jhonnen told Vette. “He sounds cute.” He winked and Vette snorted a laugh and rolled her eyes, lekku flashing amusement.

The door ahead of them was locked but Jhonnen thrust his lightsaber through it to break the seal and then forced the sides apart. He stepped into the room first in case they were ambushed and found a Selkath scientist or doctor bent over… another Selkath. This one lying limp on the operating table, bits of flesh replaced in chunks with bits of metal that it weirdly hurt to look at.

Jhonnen forced his eyes back onto the geneticist “Hiya. You must be Gorima.”

<< What? How did you get in here? >>

Jhonnen point his thumb at the ruined door behind them. “Door was open.”
There was a long pause before Gorima spoke again, looking from Jhonnen, to the ruined door, down to his patient and back to Jhonnen. << You are not here with my underwriters. No, you are something else entirely. You are trouble >>

“So I’ve been told.” Jhonnen shrugged. “I need to have a chat with your ‘underwriters’.”

Gorima shook his head. << I am unable to comply with your request, as I do not know their present location. However, I do know where they intend to be. Colonel Darok and Darth Arkous will arrive shortly to claim these prototype Rakata-tech warriors. >> He gestured to the body on the slab. << They are self-repairing, virtually immortal. I am most proud of my creations, though it did take many dozens of attempts to make the grafting process non-lethal. >>

Jakarro roared, shoving past Vette and overturning a table covered in some manner of scientific or medical apparatus. << Gorima! You planned to cut me open, you double-dealing gorryl slug! >>

Gorima held both hands up like he had a hope in corellian hell of assuaging the angry wookie. << It was not my decision! Admittedly, I was eager for my first attempt at an implant on a wookie… >>

Deefour shouted, “He mustn’t get another chance to betray us! Shoot him already.”

Jhonnen opened his mouth too slowly and Gorima slumped over dead as Jakarro fired. Closing his mouth, he considered that it probably couldn’t have happened to a nicer Selkath. He looked over to Vette to gauge her reaction. Vette shrugged, lekku flashing that she was actually okay.

It bothered him a little that she had become so inured to death. It made sense, but it bothered him.

His attention was immediately drawn upwards as the back wall opened to reveal a viewing window. Arkous, dressed as he had been last time Jhonnen had seen him, was standing beside a taller, bald human male in white armor. Probably Colonel Darok, unless Arkous was two-timing him. He seemed like the two-timing sort. Just look how he was treating the Empire.

Jhonnen flashed a sharp smile. “Heya hot stuff. You’ve been a very naughty boy.”

Arkous cocked one ridged brow. “How very unexpected…”

“This the potential complication you sensed?” asked Arkous’s companion.

Jhonnen was just going to assume it was Darok until he got a different name.

Arkous shook his head. “No, my advisor is not among them, though I still sense her presence. It would appear Beniko convinced my associate here that I’m up to no good.”

“Nah, Republic Colonel is just a bad look on you.”

Darok sneered. “He thinks you’ve gone over to the other side.”

Jhonnen did not think that, not that he owed tweedle-fuck and fucking-dee an explanation. It wouldn’t make sense for this to be a simple case of defection because they had sacked the Jedi Temple.

“It is somewhat amusing, isn’t it?” Arkous said.

“He’s cute,” Jhonnen teased, “Makes me want a conspiracy of my very own.”

The only, only upside of this banthashit was that he got to sass a Dark Council member. And he’d been wanting to sass a Dark Council member since Vengean.
The window slid closed but Arkous’s voice kept coming, echoing over the facility intercom. “Sorry to cut this short, but since we have everything we need…”

Jhonnen’s danger sense kicked off halfway through the sentence and he grabbed Vette, pulling her instinctively into him as the facility rocked.

“We’re leaving now.” Arkous said. “As this facility comes crashing down upon itself, enjoy a preview of our Infinite Army.”

There was a deep, resounding creak and water started to flood the room.

“Jhonnen…” Vette said, stepping away from him. “Remember what I said earlier.”

Jhonnen froze. He stared at Vette and realized that if it came to a choice between letting her die by being crushed or sticking a lightsaber through that, he would kill her. Bile rose up in his throat at the thought. He shouldn’t have brought her. He shouldn’t expose her to danger you were supposed to protect the person you loved, weren’t you? Why was he so bad at this? Why was he so bad at—

“Jhonnen,” Vette said his name firmly. “Think.”

Think. These deep sea facilities always had emergency pods.

“Me again.” The Republic man in his ear was back. “Darok and Arkous ejected all the emergency pods.” Despair drained into the recesses of his brain. “No going back the way you came. Good news is I slaved one of the pods.” Hope. “Got it on remote pilot, headed for a docking hatch nearby. You should have the coordinates by now. Get moving!”

Jhonnen looked at Vette and Jakarro. “We’ve got a slaved escape pod headed for a nearby hatch. This way!”

He darted deeper into the facility, going towards the hatch his new friend had lit up for him. Vette kept up with him, Jakarro bringing up the rear. What little resistance stood in their way, mostly droids, Jhonnen slammed backwards and cut down as they kept moving.

“Getting readings from their alpha cyborg,” said the Republic man. “That thing’s serious—and it’s coming right for you! Stay sharp!”

“Move!” Jhonnen shouted, “End of the corridor!”

He let Vette and Jakarro overtake him, turning around and moving backwards so that the cyborg wouldn’t take them by surprise.

They were all over by the console when the cyborg tore through a door on the other side of the room. Jhonnen ignited both of his lightsabers. “Vette,” he said, grinding his teeth when they came back together. “When that pod gets here, get in it.”

He leapt forward, ignoring her response because he didn’t have time for an argument, he just had to trust her. The Selkath, metallic pieces glittering in the watery red light, slapped him out of the air with one big broad hand. Jhonnen hit water and rolled, feet slipping underneath him and he tried to get them under control. He parried a thrust from the Selkath’s warblade and followed the blade along, driving his lightsaber through the cyborg’s left side.

That should have finished it.

He had to end this quickly because he didn’t want Vette to abandon him.
He parried a blow to his head, sliding backwards, the water on the slick metal flooring making it difficult to keep his feet.

“Lana said you were tough,” The man in his ear said. “C’mon, let’s see it.”

Green bolts shot past his head.

“Fuck off!” Vette shouted.

Jhonnen rushed in. He drove both blades through the cyborg’s chest and kicked it backwards. He slid forward on the slick metal flooring and golf-swung, slicing through the cyborg’s neck. He watched the body for a full beat, in case it got up again, and then leapt over to help Jakarro with a couple of droids before returning to Vette and the man she had over the holo on the console.

He was cute, short hair that was long on top and stuck up in a vaguely stupid but somehow endearing way. He had implants around one eye. “Hang on,” he said. “Emergency pod’s almost secure, but not quite.”

Jhonnen inclined his head politely. “Thanks for the save.”

The man looked up and gave him a quizzical look, that was also kind of cute. “You’re not worried that I’m from the Republic?”

“Assuming that you’re piloting that thing to save our collective asses? Not particularly.”

There was a beat. “It’s docked. Move.”

Jhonnen chased after Vette and claimed the seat next to her while Jakarro took the other wall to himself. The pod headed for the surface and they all breathed a communal sigh of relief.

When Jakarro had gone to make sure his ship was alright, Vette reached over and pinched Jhonnen’s arm. Hard.

“Ow!” He rubbed the spot. “What was that for?”

“Did you really think I was just going to leave you?” she hissed, lekku tense with annoyance.

Jhonnen shrugged. “If it’s that or get crushed by depressurization, I would hope so.”

“Well I wouldn’t.” She frowned at him. “And I’d hope you wouldn’t leave me either.”

Jhonnen deflated. “Never in a million years,” he promised. He did not tell her that it was because she was the best thing to ever happen to him. He did not tell her that he loved her. He did, however, offer her a small smile. “I’m sorry.”

“Just, assume it’s mutual, alright. I won’t leave you if you don’t leave me. I thought that was understood.”

He nodded, thoroughly brow beaten and still feeling kind of sick about the fact that he’d realized there was, in fact, a situation in which he’d kill her.

Vette sighed. “Let’s go meet up with Beniko and What’s-his-name and go home.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen agreed. “That sounds good.” He paused for a moment. “Can you call him ‘what’s-his-name’ if we legitimately don’t know his name?”
Vette shrugged, lekku flashing *I don’t care.*

They returned to the conference room where they’d left Lana and found her in conversation with the man from the holo. In color he had tan skin and brown hair, highlighted by a vibrantly red jacket. He was *very* cute in person and Jhonnen tried to let that distract from the conversation he’d just had with Vette.

It wasn’t doing a great job.

“Wellcome back,” Lana said, turning to address Jhonnen. “Once again you’ve displayed a skill and determination that few possess.”

“I’ve seen worse,” said the man.

“Perhaps I should make proper introductions…” Lana said.

“No need to tell me who I’m addressing.” The man folded his arms over his chest. “I’m Theron Shan—Republic SIS, and your new ally.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Strange bedfellows, but I’ve heard of stranger.”

“Theron was fooled by the Colonel in much the same way as we were fooled by Darth Arkous,” Lana explained.

Theron nodded. “And between what you found down in that lab and what Lana and I pieced together, I can tell you they’re both traitors.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement.

“Arkous and Darok are in league with a dangerous movement: a shadowy cult known as the Order of Revan.”

Jhonnen cocked an eyebrow. “I heard that Revan died. Recently, for someone who should have died what, three hundred years ago, but still. Dead.”

“It’s not Revan himself,” Lana said. “But those who follow his doctrine we’re concerned with. They seem to have grown rather bold.”

“How so?”

“The Order of Revan used to operate in the shadows of Imperial space, but now their ranks include at least one major Republic figure.”

“That means I can’t trust my people, and Lana can’t trust hers,” Theron looked Jhonnen over after he said it. “Present company excluded. And if the Revanites are building an army of cyborgs—”

<< I do not care about any of this! >> roared Jakarro, interrupting and leaving Jhonnen to wonder how many conference rooms he’d busted into before he found the right one. << I want revenge on the Pub and the Imp who left me to die—twice! >>

Jhonnen sighed and gestured. “This is Jakarro.”

“And I am Ceetwo Deefour,” announced Deefour happily. “Former translator to Her Imminence, Queen Lina of Onderon.”

Both Lana and Theron touched their faces with vague exasperation, but Theron recovered quickly.
“Hey,” he said, surprisingly brightly. “Jakarro—how would you feel about helping me track those two down?”

<< I can help, >> announced Jakarro proudly. << I have contacts all over the galaxy. But I do the driving. >>

“We’ll talk about it,” Theron said, sounding like he was definitely not going to let Jakro drive. “Lana, will you be joining us?”

“We don’t yet know how deep the Revanites’ influence runs. I must learn what I can from within the Empire.”

Theron nodded and he and Jakarro left. Leaving Jhonnen alone with Lana and Vette, who was probably still mad at him.

“You’ve done well here,” Lana praised. “As expected. We’ll speak back on the space dock. Our work is done.”

“See you soon then,” Jhonnen said.

He left with Vette at his side and headed back to the landing platform when Quinn was supervising some Selkath workers loading up some kolto.

“My lord,” Quinn inclined his head. “We’re nearly finished, the negotiations took a little longer than expected.”

Jhonnnen nodded. “I’m going to go take a nap, we need to return to Vaiken.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen curled up on his mattress, devoid of his shoes but otherwise fully dressed. He pressed his face to his pillow to muffle his sobs.

He’d been willing to kill Vette. *Kill her*, if it kept her from dying from depressurization. But he loved her. I wasn’t sure if this was proof of his feelings or proof that his feelings for Vette were shallow and fake.

If you loved someone, you shouldn’t be able to hurt them right?

Then he thought about his mother. His mother had pushed him through a window to protect him from his father’s soldiers. It had hurt. He had scars from the plastiglass. She had loved him.

Jhonnen exhaled.

It wasn’t that he didn’t love Vette.

And that was something.

Jhonnen waited for Lana in the cantina. He looked up and raised his brow at her. “You’re late.”

“Sorry,” Lana inclined his head. “I had to confirm some things before coming to see you. As I suspected, the Order of Revan as it once existed is no more. A bit of a shame really.”

Jhonnen tilted his head curiously.
“The Revanites’ pragmatism may have been anathema to the Sith, but there was something appealing about it.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Really? I don’t know much about it.”

She shrugged. “The Order of Revan, as it stands now, doesn’t wish to change the Empire from within. It aims to destroy us completely, and the Republic along with us. I’ve not yet learned how or why, but Theron Shan might. He appears to be rather good at his job.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Cute and competent, you’ve chosen well.”

“If you say so,” Lana shrugged. “I’ve been too preoccupied by our state of affairs to notice.”

Jhonnen cleared his throat and resisted the urge to look down at the floor in shame.

“Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“Uh… you called me?” Jhonnen rubbed the back of his neck. “So… uh… what do you make of Jakarro?”

“Jakarro will prove useful to us. That much I sense unmistakably. I should get to my investigation. Whatever Arkous’s Revanites and their Infinite Army has in store for the galaxy. It can’t be good.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen nodded his agreement. “That’s fucking true.”

“May the Force ever serve you,” Lana bowed. Jhonnen watched her leave and slumped back into his seat.

Vette was probably still mad at him, but he didn’t want to drink alone. Jhonnen produced his comm. “Quinn.”

“My lord?”

“Care to join me in the cantina?”

There was a pause where Jhonnen expected Quinn to turn him down. But Quinn nodded. “Of course, my lord, I’ll be right there.”

Jhonnen tucked his comm back into a pocket and ordered a pair of whiskeys, waiting at the back booth where he’d met with Lana for Quinn.

Quinn arrived, looked at the second whiskey, and took a seat. “Not drinking with Vette, my lord?”

“Ah… no. Things were stressful on Manaan. I’m giving her space.”

Quinn nodded and took a sip of his whiskey.

“Not that you’re… not that I wouldn’t have invited you out for drinks otherwise. I just… uh… you don’t seem interested.”

Quinn gave him a small smile. “I understand, my lord.”

Jhonnen took a long drink of whiskey. “So, how much kolto did we get?”

“More than I had suspected, my lord, I can send you the complete manifest.”
“No, no, I trust you.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Jhonnen sipped his whiskey, and tried to just enjoy spending time with Quinn, rather than thinking about his argument with Vette.
The Order Of Revan

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn track down Arkous with the intention of putting the boot in.

“Are you alright?” Vette said as Jhonnen opened the door to his bedroom in their Dromund Kaas apartment. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

Jhonnen flapped his jaw uselessly and rubbed the back of his neck. “I… assumed you were still mad at me after that argument.”

Vette’s lekku twitched with irritation. “Jhonny.”

“Y-yeah?”

“We are going to argue on occasion. Give me like, an hour, after a fight. If I need more time, I’ll tell you.”

He nodded.

Her lekku shifted to being more sympathetic, which caused Jhonnen to drop his gaze to the bedroom floor.

Vette entered the room and sat down next to him. “Sometimes I forget how awkward you are. You’ve never had friends, you’ve never had a romance.” She reached over and curled a hand over his. “You just don’t know this stuff.”

“I’m sorry.”

She squeezed his hand. “It’s fine.”

He kept staring at the floor until her cheek settled on his shoulder. “So, are you alright?”

“Now that I suspect you’re not still mad at me? Yeah. I’m feeling a lot better.” He turned his hand under hers and laced their fingers together. “Thanks, Vette.”

Her lekku twitched, brushing a little against his shoulder. He almost wanted to turn around and read her mood, but it would change if he did and this was… nice. It was nice knowing that she still cared about him.

“Thanks for bearing with me,” Jhonnen said with a sigh. “I know it must seem like I don’t know my ass from a hole in the ground, but I appreciate you sticking it out.”

Vette chuckled. “Well, I like you.” She rubbed her cheek against his head. “I’m glad I’m here.”

Which was still wild to him. She could go back to Taunt and the boys, people she obviously missed, but she was here with him instead.

He kind of wanted to kiss her.
He wouldn’t, it would be weird and invasive and might change things.

It just wasn’t worth the risk.

His comm beeped.

Jhonnen made no attempt to move.

The comm beeped again.

“You gonna get that?” Vette asked, also not moving.

Jhonnen sighed. “I probably should.”

There was another beat and Vette started chuckling. Jhonnen groaned a little before pulling away and stooping to pull his comm out of the pocket of the pants he’d been wearing the day before. He clicked the button.

“My lord,” Lana gave a shallow bow. “Please meet me on Vaiken Spacedock.”

The comm channel closed. He sighed, letting his shoulders drop. “I’ve gotta call Quinn.”

Vette nodded. She pressed her nose to his temple before pulling away. “I’ll go pack.”

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Returning to Vaiken Space Dock, Jhonnen followed Lana’s instructions back to the office where he’d first met her and Darth Arkous. Vette stuck by his side, and Jhonnen was glad to have her.

Lana was working at the the table-imbedded console, though she looked up as Jhonnen and Vette entered the room.

“Glad to see you again, as always,” Lana said. “But I’m afraid further niceties will have to wait. I know I’ve mentioned before a strange disturbance within the Force—a sort of writhing mass tied to Darth Arkous.”

“Pleasant,” Vette said under her breath.

Lana continued. “I thought I’d use my connection to Arkous to seek out others tied to the disturbance—Revanites working against us from within. I found a few.”

“What do you want to do about that?” Jhonnen asked.

“Theron Shan helped me decipher coded messages between the Revanites. Due to your interference on Manaan, they’ve accelerated their schedule.”

“Well, at least I intimidate someone,” Jhonnen said, being all of five foot five and generally ridiculous.

“Darth Arkous is intelligent, manipulative and immensely powerful,” said Lana without a shred of humor. “We mustn’t get over confident.”

Jhonnen bit down on the urge to apologize.

“There’s another way to stop Arkous,” Lana said. “Theron’s traced his activities to Rakata Prime. He and Colonel Darok are building their Infinite Army.”
“Greaaat,” Vette said.

Jhonnen was inclined to agree with her.

“And there’s more,” Lana said. “The implants they’re using—they’re made from pieces of the Star Forge.”

Jhonnen gave her a blank look. The... didn’t it explode?

“The Star Forge was a Force-imbued, self-sustaining shipyard. Rakatan,” Lana explained. “It was destroyed centuries ago, but the Revanites have recovered some of the wreckage. Its technology makes the soldiers nearly immortal. Seizes their minds as well, placing them under the Revanite’s full control.”

“Like the cyborg on Manaan,” Jhonnen said darkly. “Not looking forward to more of that if I’m being honest.” He shrugged. “Well, let’s go put the boot in.”

“My shuttle is already prepped,” Lana said. “Theron and Jakarro are waiting for us planetside. The sooner we depart for Rakata Prime, the better.”

Jhonnen pulled his comm out of his pocket. “Quinn?”

“Yes, my lord?” said Quinn, appearing in Jhonnen’s palm.

“We’re heading to Rakata Prime, take the ship and hang out in orbit to wait for us.”

“Yes my lord.”

Jhonnen put the comm back into a pocket and looked at Lana. “We’ll follow you.”

Lana nodded and left the console, leading the way to her shuttle.

Vette’s hand brushed Jhonnen’s as they walked and he resisted the urge to take hers only by remembering that he didn’t know how his friendship with a wise-cracking twi’lek would be taken by another Sith.

To Lana’s credit she hadn’t called Vette his slave yet, but he had no way of knowing if that was because Lana didn’t care or had assumed or anything. He didn’t know Beniko, and therefore he couldn’t trust Beniko.

Lana flew the shuttle while Jhonnen and Vette hung out outside the cockpit, Vette checking her blasters.

It was a long flight, and Jhonnen wished they’d made it in their own ship so he could meditate somewhere familiar. But it was what it was.

They landed on the Rakata Prime and Jhonnen and Vette followed Lana out to where Jakarro and Theron Shan were waiting.

Jhonnen inclined his head in greeting. “Agent Shan, Jakarro, Deefour.”

<< It’s about time! I thought maybe you got lost. >>

Jhonnen narrowed his eyes at Jakarro, but Deefour was in a hurry to apologize on his master’s behalf. “Jakarro! Display at least a modicum of respect!”
“Hey,” Theron tossed his chin in greeting. “We’re set to move on the Temple of the Ancients when you are.”

“The big pillar-y thing?” Jhonnen indicated it with his thumb where it spiraled out of the ground. It was appropriately phallic for how much of a cock Arkous was.

Theron nodded. “Yeah. The Rakata designed the Star Forge in that temple thousands of years ago. Now it’s Arkous and Darok’s grunt factory.”

“Theron and I will be monitoring your progress from Jakarro’s ship,” said Lana. Jhonnen wondered when that was decided but didn’t feel like bringing it up. “We’ll assist you as we can, keep you apprised of matters.”

<< And I will go ahead of you to make destruction and draw enemy fire! >> Jakarro said proudly.

“You’ll what?” demanded Deefour. “Jakarro, I agreed to no such thing! Wait, was this the talk with Agent Shan you powered me down for?”

<< Shut up, droid, or you will be turned off for good! >>

Theron cleared his throat to redirect the flow of conversation. “Should warn you,” he said to Jhonnen. “It’s a rough road to the temple. The area’s lousy with tribal Rakatans more than happy to fight. Found that out the hard way…”

Jhonnen gave him a small smile even as Deefour announced that they were all going to die.

“Remain focused and all will be well,” Lana said easily. “I’m sure of it. We’ll be in touch soon.”

Jhonnen and Vette began the long, but beautiful, road to the temple, kicking up white sand and passing under picturesque palm trees as they went. The water was cool and inviting, like somewhere they might have gone on vacation.

And they couldn’t properly enjoy it because it felt like every few feet they were in a fight with the tribal rakatans who dotted the coast line.

Vette caught his hand as they walked the beautiful coast line. “Is it clear?”

Jhonnen reached out with his senses and then nodded.

“Let’s get a picture, like we did on Manaan.” She grinned at him. “Pretend for a few seconds that we’re on vacation.”

Jhonnen laughed. He pulled out his comm and scooped Vette up so he was holding her in the holo. Holo taken, Jhonnen set her down and tucked his comm away.

They continued up the coast line until Theron called and told them to turn and take the path through the rakatan village. They skirted the village as best they could, neither of them wanting to slaughter people who were just defending themselves. Jhonnen and Vette helped each other up and over the fence for the small arena area and then darted across when they heard the unmistakable roar of a rancor.

Jhonnen cupped his hands to give Vette a leg up over the fence before Force propelling himself up and the pair of them scampering for the trees and through a stream to disrupt their scent.
“Alright?” Jhonnen asked as Vette flagged a little. “Need a breather?”

“Short one,” she said, nodding her head, lekku communicating her exhaustion but also that she was just tired, not otherwise unwell.

“Darth Arkous knows you’re here,” Lana said in his ear. “I’d say he sensed your presence, but I imagine it’s all the commotion. He and Colonel Darok have shored up defenses outside the temple with their new conscripts. You know what to do.”

Jhonnen popped his back. “We’ve got more resistance between us as the temple.”

“Fun,” Vette sighed.

They started up the slope towards the temple, battling their way through the revanites’ forward camps. In one sortie, Jhonnen missed a parry and ended up flat on his back trying to dodge blows from a Jedi’s lightsaber. Vette peppered his assailant with bolts until his was forced to turn around to try and deal with her. Jhonnen kicked out as the Jedi turned, tangling his feet around his, breaking his concentration and causing a blaster bolt to whizz through the Jedi’s skull.

Jhonnen looked up to where Vette was huddled behind some boxes so the deflected bolts didn’t hit her.

“You alright?” she asked.


“Anytime.”

They hurried forward, coming up at the base of the temple to watch conscripts patrolling outside. Infinite Army.

Jhonnen and Vette crouched low.

“They might come from every direction at once,” Jhonnen warned. “And we can’t stick together because I’m melee and you’re ranged.”

“How would you handle this in an ideal world?” Vette asked. “I trust you.”

“I’d keep most of the attention on myself, while you hang back and focus on getting headshots to disable the cyborgs long enough for me to decapitate them. But that leaves you vulnerable.”

“You can warn me of people flanking me, right?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen frowned at her. “Not really.”

“You can warn Kira, I’ve seen you two moving in sync before.”

“Yeah but that involves a certain amount of being in her head.” Jhonnen shifted his weight uncomfortable, remembering the one time he tried to warn Vette through the Force. He could still remember her revulsion.

“So, be in my head.” Vette said. “It’ll be weird, probably for both of us, but I trust you and we need the edge.”

Jhonnen took a deep breath, knowing that feeling her disgust would probably undo him.
Tentatively, he reached out and touched her thoughts. He found surprise, and then acceptance, Vette’s lekku twitched with a little bit of discomfort.

“Your thoughts are… warm,” she said after a minute. “Which, wow, that’s a feeling. Come on let’s do this.”

“Alright,” Jhonnen said.

He leapt up and whistled, drawing the attention of the Infinite Army conscripts before him, thoughts lingering on Vette’s.

Jhonnen fought aggressively, focusing on getting attention and carving off limbs. He kept his senses keyed to Vette, warning her to move when she had to move. It was like shouting into the abyss. Vette couldn’t respond the way Kira had and he couldn’t take his eyes off what he was doing long enough to make sure that his warnings had gotten through. He just kept tethered to Vette’s life force until the fighting was over and he could rush back over to her.

His eyes traveled up her arms to the burn marks that marred her blue skin.

She smiled at him and gestured to the temple steps with her eyes.

They hurried up the Temple steps, carving through Revanites until they came to a large closed door with a holoterminal at the opening console. Jhonnen called Jakarro’s ship.

“That’s it,” said Lana. “We’re in. Theron?”

“Okay…” Theron nodded, mostly to himself. “According to the structural plans, the only way to get at the head Revanites is through that conscription center. The cyborgs are dormant for now, but they’re set to go on high alert once they detect you.” He brightened a little. “A console overload will fry them from the inside… Nope. Can’t work the power safeties from here. You’ll have to do the honors.”

“A sound plan,” Lana said with an approving now. Then her brow furrowed. “Theron, why can’t I get this sensor to work?”

“Because Jakarro isn’t a big fan of upkeep?” Theron suggested. “Probably a dead relay. I’ll check it out.”

Theron left and Lana turned her attention back onto Jhonnen and Vette. “Now that he’s gone, might I recommend not doing as Theron suggests? An overload would destroy the data as well. The Empire might want its own Infinite Army someday. You would have to fight those cyborgs but…”

Jhonnen scowled. The Empire was at top of his personal list of ‘people who were not allowed anything calling itself an Infinite Army’ largely because he knew how the Dark Council would use it. “We don’t have time,” Jhonnen said, trying to communicate that he had nothing but respect for Lana herself. “Every minute we dither is another minute Darok and Arkous might use to escape.” He looked at Vette who was manning the console. “Fry them.”

“Hey, there you go,” said Theron, returning to the command console. “Nice work. For, you know, being Imperial and all.”

“Happy to impress you,” Jhonnen said, almost reflexively.

“Room’s clear of vital signs,” Lana said, masking her disappointment well. “You’re all set.”
“If you say so,” Theron shrugged. “Hey, those sensor relays were fine by the way. Not sure what the problem is.”

“Was,” Lana said smoothly. “The sensor appears to be working again…” she bowed and the feed closes.

Jhonnen and Vette proceeded.

“We’re seeing movement on the temple roof,” Theron said in Jhonnen’s ear. “Might be Darok and Arkous trying to make an escape. Looks like they’ve got a shuttle—we can shoot it down if we have to, but I’d rather take them in for questioning if you can. Hurry!”

Jhonnen doubted that Arkous would let them take him in for questioning. He was one of the twelve most powerful Sith in the galaxy, though admittedly that was because the Sphere of Military Offense had taken a beating in recent years.

They proceeded to the roof, joining up with Jakarro and Deefour at the last minute.

Arkous glowered at them from the landing pad, his arms folded over his chest.

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said brightly. “Shuttle not ready?”

Arkous sighed. “We Revanites went through a great deal of trouble to reach this point in our campaign. For you to hamper our progress it’s… regrettable. You, Lana, you were never anything more than pawns to us. Important pawns, but pawns all the same.”

“The nice Republic man wants me to take you in for questioning. Can I just get a loud, clear, no before I start chopping limbs off?”

“No,” Arkous said with a cruel smirk. “Threats? It’s no surprise that’s all you’re capable of.”

<< Enough! >> roared Jakarro. << Darth Arkous will not cooperate! We kill him before he flees! >>

“This… grotesque alien beast does have it partly figured out. Indeed, I won’t cooperate. But I’m not fleeing—”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen said. “I’m having a hard time figuring out where you were gonna go.”

Arkous glared. “Colonel?”

Colonel Darok came around the corner. “If you could see what we were doing—what we want for the galaxy. But you can’t see. You’ll just have to die.”

Jhonnen felt for Vette’s thoughts and launched himself forward at Arkous. The disgraced councillor dodged backwards and retaliated with lightning, forcing Jhonnen to drop to prone and roll to avoid. Throughout the metre of combat, Jhonnen kept in touch with Vette’s thoughts while she and Jakarro harried the colonel.

“What’s this?” Arkous sneered. He reached out a hand and grabbed the air. Jhonnen felt Vette’s scream before he heard it as the sith lord sent her flying into a pillar.

Jhonnen did not call her name, but he kept his thoughts wrapped around her tighter than ever, so he could almost feel her breath in his chest, and he pressed his assault on Arkous, tripping him and carving one arm off.
“Darok!”

“No,” Jhonnen swung and carved Arkous open from shoulder to shoulder. Without pausing, Jhonnen threw himself at Darok, taking advantage of a blindspot to stick his lightsaber into the Colonel’s lungs. He unignited his lightsabers, leaving the kill to Jakarro, and bolted to where Vette had fallen. Blood dripped down the corner of her mouth, but she was alive. Jhonnen could feel her heartbeat. He lifted her slowly with the Force, careful to keep her back straight and careful not to jostle her. Moving slowly he brought her to the shuttle.

Arkous and Darok had one one bed between them and Jhonnen set Vette on it lying her on her stomach so he could apply a medpac to her spine. She needed proper care but that would keep her off of death’s door for a little while longer.

He stuck his head out of the shuttle and shouted “Jakarro, get your ass inside if you don’t want to get left behind.” Then he settled at the flight controls and contacted Lana and Theron. “They’re dead,” Jhonnen said. “And I think we all know that they weren’t coming quietly.”

“I felt Darth Arkous’s passing,” Lana said. “This is an unfortunate turn.”

<< Not unfortunate for me! I got my revenge! >>

“Yes you did!” agreed Deefour. “What a relief!”

“Fuck!” swore Theron, his fist colliding with the flight controls on Jakarro’s ship. “Those two were running the show. They were our best hope of exposing the Revanites.”


There was a long, tense pause, Jhonnen got the shuttle ready for flight, before Theron shouted. “We’ve got company! Ships! Capital-sized, whole bunch of them. Can’t tell if they’re yours or ours but one of them is dropping in to visit.”

Jhonnen looked at the instruments as a capital ship dropped into orbit, shining like a triangular second moon in the pristine blue sky.

A voice echoed. “As important as Arkous and Darok were to the cause, their deaths won’t stop us. They won’t even slow us down.”

“That voice,” Theron said with awe. “I’ve heard it before.”

“It’s Revan,” Lana said.

Wasn’t Revan dead? Jhonnen remembered hearing that the legendary jedi/sith had been cut down in the Foundry. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

“I almost had the Infinite Army I wanted so badly,” said, apparently, Revan. “But even without them, I have enough.”

“Fascinating,” Jhonnen said.

<< Move over! >> Jakarro warbled. << I will fly us back to my ship. >>

“Not your ship,” Jhonnen said with a scowl. “You will drop Vette and I off at my ship.”

<< Fine, fine! >>
Jhonnen relinquished the pilot’s seat and moved back to the sleeping chambers, kneeling down beside Vette’s face. He put a hand near her mouth to feel her breathing and closed his eyes.

He kept his thoughts with hers but even as he stubbornly refused to budge he felt an old terror growing.

There was a cold spot in his head from where he’d felt Isixia’s death. It had broken something inside of him. Left some part of him damaged and easily rubbed raw. It left him terrified of belonging, of commitment, of love.

What would break if he felt Vette die?

Everything.

“My lord,” Quinn spoke from the doorway. “I’ve done what I can for Vette, you should see marked improvement over the next day, but please, you have to eat.”

Jhonnen opened his eyes, kneeling on the floor of his room with Vette lying unconscious on the bed. Arkous had broken her spine and the kolto and stims were helping, but it might be another twenty-four hours before she woke up, a week before she could move.

“My lord,” Quinn entreated him a second time. “She will be fine, I promise.”

Jhonnen nodded and stood up. “I need to go to Vaiken Spacedock to meet with Lana Beniko,” Jhonnen said sourly. “You…” the sourness dried up and he stared at the floor. “You will comm me if there’s any change? And make an appointment for her to see a surgeon on Dromund Kaas?”

“Immediately, my lord,” Quinn promised. “I made something to eat in the galley.”

Jhonnen looked down at Vette, lying on her broken back wrapped in bandages with a kolto drip hanging from a hook in Jhonnen’s bedroom ceiling. She was breathing, at least. She would heal.

Jhonnen went to the galley and ate what Quinn had prepared, barely tasting it but accepting that if the medic said you had to eat then you had to eat. When they docked at Vaiken, Jhonnen, somewhat reluctantly, left Vette in Quinn’s care and headed to the little office where he usually met with Lana.

The office had been trashed.

Irritation flooded Jhonnen’s veins. He didn’t have time for this. He didn’t have time to rescue Beniko while he was trying to get Vette into surgery. He didn’t have time for the Revanites.

<< A7-M1 = under great stress >> whistled M1, entering the destroyed little office. << A7-M1 = Terrified // Secret message = decoded // Lana Beniko = on Manaan // You go see her there // You + A7=M1 = never spoke >>

The droid rolled out of the room and left Jhonnen standing there. Closing his eyes he calculated how long it would take to get to Manaan from Vaiken. Two days. He pulled out his comm.

“Yes, my lord?”

“When is Vette’s surgery?”

“I have it scheduled for the beginning of next week, I pulled your rank.”
“Thank you. Get ready to leave, I’m on my way back.”

That gave just barely enough time to see what Lana needed on Manaan. Cutting it close but he didn’t want to hang Lana out to dry, she deserved better than that and if the droid was scared, there was probably good reason to be scared.

He tracked through the cantina to lose any tailers and headed back to his ship.

“Manaan,” he said as the door closed behind him, “but take a slightly more roundabout way to Manaan to lose any tailers.”

“At once, my lord.”

“Any… uh… any change?”

“No, my lord, I would have called.”

“Right,” Jhonnen nodded absently. “Sorry.”

“My lord,” Quinn said. “If I may?”

“Yeah, yeah of course.”

Hands came down on his shoulders and squeezed. “She. Will. Be. Fine.”

Jhonnen raised his head, coming face to face with Quinn’s raised eyebrows. He smiled despite himself. “I probably seem pretty ridiculous.”

“Not at all,” Quinn said removing his hands from Jhonnen’s shoulders. “The woman you love has been injured, your distraction is understandable.”

It wasn’t… quite right.

She was the woman Jhonnen loved but they weren’t involved like that.

Then again, pretending they were sleeping together had been how they’d gotten away with taking one another in confidence so maybe Quinn didn’t need to know that.

Jhonnen headed to the same conference room where he’d met with Lana before and was a little bit surprised to see Theron Shan and Jakarro there as well.

“You made it,” said Lana.

Theron nodded. “The way Revan was laying waste to that place, I wasn’t sure you’d come out of it in one piece.” Theron’s expression softened. “Your friend, is she…”

“She’s alive,” Jhonnen said, touched that Theron had thought to comment. “Thank you.”

“I’m just… glad you got out of there. Any ally right now is a welcome ally.”

Jhonnen even managed a small smile. “Well, most of my allies aren’t as attractive, but I think I’ll survive thinking you feel the same.”


Jhonnen had mostly been joking.
“If I may say, Agent Shan,” helped Deefour. “You appear to be rather flush all of a sudden.”

“We’re gonna—Jakarro and I and the droid, we’re leaving now so you can have your… official Imperial debrief or whatever. Lana, when you’re done, we can start picking out backwaters to go lie low in.”

Jhonnen almost commented that he could give Theron an official debriefing (woof) but with Vette lying injured, his heart just wasn’t in it. He gave Lana a questioning look.

“If we’d at least recovered the conscription protocols for the Infinite Army, this might feel more like a victory. Not that we have anyone in the Empire to trust right now. The Revanites have just proven they’re everywhere.”

Jhonnen raised his brow.

“Jakarro’s had twelve death sentences declared on him,” Lana explained. “Theron’s been disavowed by the SIS… and the Empire’s placed a bounty on my head for the murder of Darth Arkous.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jhonnen said flatly. “I killed Arkous. I’ll vouch for you.”

“I appreciate that, Wrath, I do. But you can’t fight this.”

He had been told earlier that morning that he couldn’t fight Vette’s injury and he was already sick of hearing it. Any more and he was going to start proving that he could fight these things.

Lana continued “Our names can’t be cleared unless we expose the Revanites, and we can’t expose the Revanites without knowing who to expose. The way forward is clear: Theron, Jakarro and I are going underground. We’ll find a way to uncover Revan’s plan and stop him.”

“I hate to say it, but that’s a pretty good idea,” Jhonnen said.

“If I may suggest, you should continue normally with your life. Right now, you’re the closest thing the Empire has to a soul, Wrath. Without you, they’ll forget themselves, fall apart.”

She spoke like that wasn’t precisely what he wanted because maybe in forgetting themselves the Empire would try to be something better. Or at least something different. He would take different.

“Be who you are,” she continued. “But be observant, and tell no one the truth about us or what you know. Above all, do not try to contact me.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Be safe. And I hope you figure this out.”

“I’ll do everything in my power.” She turned and walked towards the door and then turned back. “All our fates ultimately rest in your hands. Remember that.”

And then she was gone.

Jhonnen waited a decent amount of time and then returned to his ship. When the door closed behind him he let his shoulders drop. “Quinn?”

“My lord.”

“Take us home.”
Fearsome Pirate Captain

Chapter Summary

Vette recovers from her injury and our daring trio head to Rishi at the will of the Force and a mysterious letter-sender.

Jhonnen’s was the last face Vette saw before she went into surgery.

“I’m not going to judge you for watching me float,” Vette said, reaching up and flicking his nose. “I’d watch you float. I want to know you’re there if the sedatives wear off.”

“Sure, Vette. As much as they’ll let me.” He squeezed her fingers in his as she was wheeled away by the medical personnel. Then, there was nothing but to wait. Jhonnen sat in the waiting room, grateful that very few people actually recognized The Wrath Of The Emperor and so he was left alone but not in a ‘people are terrified’ sort of way. He sort of wished Quinn had come with him, but Quinn probably had his own life and didn’t like Vette much anyway.

Two and a half hours passed and a nurse in white shoes came out and showed Jhonnen into the room with the kolto tanks where Vette was recovering. He watched Vette float as the woman explained to him that she would need to be in kolto for another week but that they anticipated a full recovery with maybe some lingering soreness.

Jhonnen nodded. And watched Vette bounce.

And felt a little bit of strangeness at seeing her mostly undressed.

And watched her bounce.

He reached out through the Force and found her thoughts, hoping that her being okay with feeling him there hadn’t just been a matter of combat effectiveness. She was alive. He felt her Force signature flicker like a small bird beating against his ribcage.

When visitor hours ended, Jhonnen returned home, and found Quinn doing his dishes. Jhonnen blinked at him from the doorway. “You… didn’t have to do this.”

“I know, my lord,” Quinn dried off the plate he was putting away. “But if you’re anything like my father, you would neglect yourself without the woman you’re building a life with.”

Jhonnen blinked. Logically, he accepted that Quinn had had parents once upon a time. He’d probably even had friends growing up but it felt far away from the man standing in his kitchen.

“Am I much like your father?” Jhonnen asked, awkwardly shifting his weight.

“In this,” Quinn said. “My mother broke her leg in several places when I was a boy. They had split the housework between them, but once she was injured he tended to my sister and I and neglected himself. Valerie and I took on the lion’s share of the housework.”

“You… have a sister?”
“Had, my lord,” Quinn said. “She also enlisted and was killed by the Republic during the Sacking of Coruscant.”

“I… I’m sorry to hear that.” Jhonnen said, suddenly feeling that some of Quinn’s—Malavai’s—zeal made a little bit more sense.

Quinn hung the dish towel he was holding off the fridge.

Jhonnen bit the inside of his cheek. “Malavai… are we friends?”

Quinn frowned. “My instinct is to say no, my lord, as you’re my superior.” Jhonnen’s face fell and Quinn exhaled. “However, I am currently standing in your house doing your dishes of my own volition. So it appears we must be.”

Jhonnen smiled at that. It didn’t change anything, Quinn’s work ethic wouldn’t let it change anything, but knowing that he had a friend even while Vette was unconscious in a kolto tank was important.

Vette floated in kolto for a solid week and everyday, from the start to the end of visitor hours, Jhonnen was there, reaching out to her in his thoughts. On the seventh day, he bullied his way into being present while the doctors fished her out of the blue gel and woke her up. She opened her eyes and he smiled at her.

Vette smiled back. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” she said, lying on her back while a few more tests were run.

“I missed you,” Jhonnen said. “I’ll be just outside while you get cleaned up.”

He stepped outside the room while Vette showered to get the clinging kolto off and changed into the clean clothes he’d brought for her. A few minutes later, Vette emerged, standing on her own two legs. Jhonnen glanced around to make sure the coast was clear and then gave her a ginger hug.

Vette laughed, lekku twitching, and crushed him to her before stepping back. “I’m supposed to be careful for the rest of the month. But stars am I glad to be out of here.”

“Delivery food and vids back home?” Jhonnen asked.

Vette nodded.

“Can, uh, can Quinn come?”

Vette raised an eyebrow. “Did you two start sleeping together while I was out?”

Jhonnen snorted. “What? No. He’s just… sorta been looking out for me while you were out.”

Vette considered. “Tomorrow. Tonight should just be us. I might want a back rub and Quinn would get all offended.”

“What makes you think I know how to give a backrub?” Jhonnen asked, being fairly certain he did not know how to give a backrub.

“Perfect time to practice.”

He snorted and rolled his eyes, heading out of the hospital to take a taxi to their apartment.

Inside they hugged again, a longer, lingering hug. “I felt you in my dreams,” Vette said. “It was…”
nice."

Jhonnen pressed his forehead to the join of her neck. “I was terrified you weren’t going to wake up,” he admitted. “I was just trying to feel that you were alive.”


“He was actually a big help while you were down,” Jhonnen said. “I think we might actually be friends.”

“Captain No-Fun doesn’t have friends,” Vette said, rolling her eyes. “Though if he was going to, you’re a good one to have.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “You order food, I’ll pick the first vid?”

Vette nodded. “Yeah, Jhonny. Sounds good.”

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Two and a half months after Jhonnen and Vette had killed Arkous and Darok on Rakata Prime, they hadn’t heard anything from Lana.

Jhonnen was meditating on the dark side, feeling the cold spot in his head and remembering his mother’s final moments, savoring the knowledge that Vitreous was dead, even if the death had not been satisfying. Then he felt his consciousness fly out, like it was responding to a call. He saw a small, brilliant galaxy and watched, wordless, as every star blinked out. He saw Vette and Quinn clutching hands, white knuckled like they were terrified and then falling apart, lifeless, as cold as the extinguished stars.

Jhonnen’s eyes shot open and he bellowed “No!” before realizing that he was in his room on his ship. He reached out and found Vette, alive.

The door opened. “Jhonnen?”

He swallowed. “Vision,” he choked out. “I saw a small galaxy and watched it blink out and then saw you and Quinn dead. I got the feeling that it was the end of everything, not just the three of us.”

“Sure it wasn’t just something you ate?” Vette asked, stepping into room.

Jhonnen stood up. “Seeing as I haven’t eaten anything yet this morning, I’m pretty sure.”

“Another galaxy?” Quinn asked, standing in the doorway looking concerned. “Would you say it was a dwarf galaxy? Forgive me my lord; I couldn’t help but overhear.”

“Well, I did shout,” Jhonnen conceded. “And yeah, dwarf sounds right.”

“There is such a galaxy off the Outer Rim, known as the Rishi Maze.”

“Rishi?” said Vette. “I’ve heard of Rishi. It’s a planet. Some kind of pirate resort? Sounds like a real dive. I’ve kinda always wanted to go.” She shrugged. “More importantly, we’ve been getting a lot of spam about Rishi, offers of free travel and stuff. There’s never a sender so I’ve just been deleting them.”

“Sounds like the Force—and somebody else—wants us on Rishi.” Jhonnen said, letting his shoulders sag. “Once we get there, Vette will come with me to investigate while Quinn makes sure
no one steals our suspension and, more importantly, keeps an eye out for other Imperial vessels. I feel a pull and I need to know if someone is springing a trap.”

They were three rather tense days out from Rishi and Vette crawled into Jhonnen’s bed the first night. She knelt on the mattress and gently took his face in her hands.

“Breathe,” she commanded. “No one is dead.”

Jhonnen looked at the mattress. “No one is dead yet but what if it was a warning not to go to Rishi. Or what if something happens like with Arkous again and I get you killed?”

“Breathe,” she instructed again.

“You’d be safer with Taunt.”

Vette flicked his forehead.

“Ow! Fuck!”

“If I wanted to go back to Taunt and the guys, I would,” Vette said firmly. “Breathe.”

Jhonnen took a breath, mostly to keep from getting flicked in the forehead again.

“I’m here because I want to be here,” Vette reminded him. “And don’t forget it.”

“Or what, you’ll flick me in the face?”

“I might even get wild and pinch you,” Vette threatened.

He looked up and smiled at her. “You’re terrible to me.”

“You like it.”

They landed on Rishi and Jhonnen and Vette left the ship, Jhonnen looking as little like a sith lord as he could without forgoing his lightsabers.

“This may be the saddest, most run-down port I’ve ever seen,” Vette said as they headed down the worn wooden walkway. “I’ve said that before.” Jhonnen nodded that, yes, she had. Vette smiled and sighed. “But you keep surprising me.”

“Well,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “At least you’re not bored. Besides, I thought you wanted to visit Rishi.”

Vette shrugged and then grinned at him, lekku flashing her approval.

They proceeded into the port town, looking for something that would tell them why they were here.

“We should talk to a local,” Vette said. “Get the lay of the land, as it were.”

“Good idea,” Jhonnen said. “I assume the bird people are the locals?”

Vette nodded.

“Awesome,” Jhonnen exhaled. “Now to find a bird-person.”
They didn’t have to go far before someone, upon further investigation a bird-person, shouted “Wow!”

Jhonnen made his way over, Vette at his side, to where the bird-person was fan-spasming. “The rumors were true! You’re here! You’re really here!”

“Oh,” the bird-person batted with one large, feathered hand. “I’ve heard you described in great detail. Great detail.” Jhonnen and Vette exchanged glances and then looked back at the speaker, who continued with abandon. “You run the Howling Tempest Gang! The most daring, ruthless pirates of the Gordian Reach—” he looked wistfully into the distance. “Wherever that is.”

“Uh… yes…” Jhonnen said, trying not to read the amusement on Vette’s mouth and in her lekku. “That’s me. Captain Jhonnen. Of the Hurling—”

“Howling,” Vette corrected.

“Howling Tempest Gang.”

“Seems like everyone is Raider’s Cover is going on about you and all your insane adventures,” crowed the bird-person. “Talk about your tough customers.”

“Did you grow up speaking basic?” Jhonnen asked, hoping it wasn’t rude, or if it was rude that it was piratically rude.

“Nah. My people pick up languages and stuff real easy. Some of us like to be formal. I’m more of a cantina-talk type. Speaking of cantinas, you’ll wanna watch out for Gorro. He wants to fight you so bad it’s not even funny!”

“What, why?” Jhonnen asked, a little offended that he had someone who already wanted to shoot the pirate-persona he hadn’t had more than a minute.

“You’d have to ask him,” the bird-person shrugged. “Considering what a big deal you are, it’s probably just for bragging rights. Gorro’s at the Blaster’s Path.” He gestured. “Local watering hole. Probably washing down some tonitran jerky with some Mantellian fungolager.” He gave a wistful sigh. “I’m not allowed in there anymore—long story—so I hope someone holos your big fight, I wouldn’t want to miss a single, bloody shot.”

“Right,” Jhonnen said slowly. “Thanks.”

He and Vette stepped away where they weren’t likely to be overheard and he tried not to let her twisted smile catch. “Stop that,” he said. “It’s not funny.”

“Someone thinks you’re a pirate,” Vette said in a low voice. “That’s hilarious.” She produced her datapad and checked something. “Also the aliens are the Rishii, two i’s, and the local language is Rish but almost everyone speaks basic on account of the Rishii picking up languages quickly.”

“Good to know. What are we going to do about Gorro?” Jhonnen asked.

Vette shrugged. “He might know more about why you’re being recognized as a terrifying,” she smiled again “pirate captain.”

Jhonnen sighed. “You’re right.”
“But if it does come down to a fight, let me,” Vette said.

“What, why?”

Vette shook her head. “Because if you fight, we tell the whole island that you’re a Force user. We should keep that in our back pocket until we have a better idea of what’s going on.”

“Fine,” Jhonnen said. “But if it looks hairy, I’m backing you up.”

She grinned at him. “Of course. We’re a team.”

They headed through the pirate cove, listening to the loud, rude sounds of the market. With Vette at his side, Jhonnen remembered not to slink. She walked confidently, hands behind her head like she hadn’t a care in the world, like they were strolling somewhere other than the merchant district of a pirate cove.

It was inspiring, and it made it easy to mimic her confidence.

The Blaster’s Path was like a cantina but worse. Jhonnen had loose memories of the Slippery Slopes on Nar Shaddaa and growing up within the Empire had been taught that that was the worst it could get. Compared to The Blaster’s Path, the Slippery Slopes was basically an institution of fine manners. A drunk vomited practically in the doorway. Moving through they passed fights and dancing and dancing that looked like it was on the edge of fighting.

Jhonnen thought back to some of the cantina’s in the Empire, like the Nexus on Dromund Kaas, and decided that these people were free in ways Imperial citizens were not, and he preferred this.

Vette asked around and eventually they found out that Gorro was downstairs. They made their way down, eyes peeled for whomever Gorro might have been.

“The rhodian at the bar,” Vette said in a low voice, gesturing with her chin.

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said. “Gorro, right? A little mynock told me you were looking for me, or at least for someone who looks like me.”

<< Kareena, >> said Gorro. << Would you explain that the two-time Supreme Hunter of Goa-Ato is not intimidated by any Howling Tempest Gang scum? >>

“Think you just did that yourself, Gorro,” said the woman behind the bar, moving a bottle out of the way as Gorro got up. “Hang on—you’re not about to wreck my place again, are you? I’m still filling in blaster holes.”

<< I doubt it, >> Gorro said, sounding bored. << This one will not put up much of a fight. It is too bad, I was looking forward to a challenge. >>

“Why are we fighting?” Jhonnen asked. “I feel like I should at least know who you are before my first mate puts you in the ground.”

<< Every time I eliminate a pirate legend, my rates go up. I like credits—and an audience to watch me work. >>

“He’s all yours, Vette,” Jhonnen said.

<< People of the Blaster’s Path, watch and see just how easily the Howling Tempest Gang’s best and brightest can be disposed of. >>
Vette snorted, her hand dropping low by her hip. “Don’t get cocky.”

Gorro’s hand shot for his blaster and then he hit the floor. Vette eyeballed the men on either side of him, holding her blaster tightly. “Wanna risk it?”

They stepped back.

Kareena stepped up from behind the bar. “You know a few blaster marks is one thing, gives the place some charm. But this…”

Jhonnen eyed the rest of the room. “Someone knows why everyone knows I was on my way here. Someone is going to tell me.”

“Everyone’s talking about you,” said Kareena. “Couldn’t tell you how it all got started, but I can tell you who gave Gorro the idea to come after you.”

“Don’t do it, Kareena,” warned a man at the back of the room. “You know what Margok would say about ratting out a resident.”

She snorted. “If Margok ever pays the tab all you Nova Blades here have run up, then maybe I’ll start to care what he thinks.” She turned back to Jhonnen as the rest of the room filed out. “Guy you want is Kai Zykken, leader of the Corellian Run Scoundrels. A real gem. Gorro said Zykken owes you a pile of credits. He hired Gorro to take you out for a fraction of what it would cost to pay you.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Me and my terrible love of credits. Where do I find Mr. Zykken?”

Kareena shrugged. “Beats me. It’s not like I hang out with the guy. Ask Zykken’s crew—they’re all over Raider’s Cover. Like stink-flies.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Jhonnen said. “Can my first mate and I get a drink before we leave?”

She pulled a bottle and a couple of cups out and set them on the bar before turning to deal with Gorro’s corpse, saying something about his brother as she carried the corpse off.

Jhonnen sat down and poured a shot of whatever was in the bottle for himself and Vette.

“You,” he said. “Are a very fast draw.” He did his shot.

Vette chuckled and did her shot. “I told you, I worked as an assassin briefly.”

Jhonnen smacked his lips together, the burn tingling in his nose. “Eventually, you and Quinn are going to ditch me to rob Imperial pay stations. You’d be good at it.”

Vette barked a laugh. “I promise, I will never ditch you to do anything with Quinn instead.”

Kai Zykken was a cowardly waste of space and he didn’t keep good track of his belongings but eventually, after a frustrating chase involving a kowakian monkey-lizard and some very irritable pirates, Jhonnen and Vette had a holo of the tiny, hooded character who had warned Kai Zykken that the ‘Howling Tempest Gang’ was heading to Rishi.

“Kai Zykken,” said the hooded character through several layers of distortion. “Greetings. I speak to you now to deliver a warning. The Howling Tempest Gang is one of the galaxy’s most feared pirate associations. They have just now set their sights on Rishi. As you know, the Corellian Run Scoundrels owe the Howling Tempest Gang a great many credits. There is no telling what will
happen when you are discovered.” She unfolded her arms from across her chest. “I suggest you herald the gang’s arrival to draw unwanted attention on them; I’m dispatching several droids to Raider’s Cove to do the same. Or you could do nothing and suffer the consequences. The choice is yours.”

Jhonnen and Vette exchanged a glance.

“So we’re agreed that the tiny hooded woman was Lana, right,” Vette said. “I mean, that eye color is pretty unique among humans.”

“Not among Sith really, but the height is.” Jhonnen nodded. “Now we just have to find her.”

“The droids might be a good place to start,” Vette suggested. “I think I heard one describing our ‘exploits’ a little ways back. We just have to catch one and make it talk.”

Catching the droid proved a little more difficult than Jhonnen had initially suspected. It would not slow down, no matter how much Jhonnen shouted at it. And they couldn’t damage it because they needed information.

Eventually, Vette had an idea and aimed her fire at a light pole. As it collapsed it released a net of electricity, capturing the droid. Jhonnen walked over to the front of the thing and smiled as it stopped twitching.

“Greetings to you!” said the droid in a tinny voice. “Would you like to hear a true story about the legendary Howling Tempest Gang?”

Jhonnen cocked his brow.

“Oh!” proclaimed the droid. “I beg your pardon! I didn’t realize it was you! How exciting! Such a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Who put you up to this?” Jhonnen asked.

“I have been assigned by my master to spread word of your many accomplishments throughout Raider’s Cove. Why, in the time since your arrival, you have already defeated the illustrious Gorro, brought fear to the Corellian Run Scoundrels and the Carida Corsairs. Even the Nova Blades have taken notice of you! My master would be most impressed.”

“Well, I’m keen to meet such a fan,” Jhonnen said. “Where can I find them?”

“It just so happens that my master would like very much to see you, and has authorized me to direct you to a point of contact.” It sent the coordinates. “Oh, do be careful in your travels. Legend or no, Gorro’s brother Grumm is severely displeased as to Gorro’s fate.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen said. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

The droid turned away and almost immediately launched into the ‘totally true’ story of how the Howling Tempest Gang robbed two Republic pay stations.

“I’ll handle Grumm,” Vette said. “We should keep sitting on your Force abilities.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Maybe we won’t have to deal with him at all.”

It was wishful thinking, but there had been times when wishful thinking was all Jhonnen had had so he wasn’t about to turn away from it.
Raider’s Cove was blanketed in mist from the coastline, giving the market a surreal atmosphere as Jhonnen and Vette headed towards to coordinates the droid had given them. They stuck close together, almost close enough to touch, with Jhonnen’s senses extended around them like an early warning system. That was how he felt murderous intent and turned to face it, watching with carefully calculated dispassion as a whiphid shoved his way through the crowd.

“Grumm?” Vette asked.

“Probably.”

<< You! >> Grumm pointed at Vette. << Where do you think you’re going?! >>

“Who, me?” Vette asked teasingly, letting one hand dangle near her blaster.

“A fact you should probably consider before letting this go any further,” Vette said, one hand casually on her hip.

She was utterly fearless, from the first moment he’d met her, talking back to the jailer in Korriban’s prison, Vette had refused to let fear stop her. It was breathtaking.

<< No, you think a second—about what you have don’t and how you are going to pay for it! I am banned from twenty-six—hrk! >>

Grumm toppled forwards, clutching the bloody mess of his right knee. “Learned that from you,” Vette said to Jhonnen.

Jhonnen nodded. “I do hate it when people monologue. Are we just going to leave him like that?”

Vette studied Grumm for a moment and then shrugged. “Yeah, why not?”

“You know, we should probably start dressing like pirates,” Jhonnen said. “As opposed to just casually.”

“We can go change after we meet up with ‘totally not Lana’.” She held her hands up for the scare quotes.

Jhonnen felt someone reach for his thoughts, just enough to give him the sense to look up. So he looked up, and across the small dispersing crowd he saw the woman from Kai Zykken’s holo. As he and Vette drew near, she reached up to remove her hood and face mask, revealing that she was, in fact, Lana Beniko.

“Lana,” Jhonnen inclined his head a little.

“The Emperor’s Wrath. Good to see you again. Any… word from your namesake?”

“Nope,” Jhonnen said. “The Hand claims that he isn’t dead and that’s the last I’ve heard.”

“Pretty cagey,” Theron said, coming out of one of the back buildings. “Think you’d be more open with Lana after all she’s sacrificed for your Empire.”

“Hi, Theron,” Jhonnen said. “She asked a question and I answered it, how is that cagey?”

“Is that a good hello or a bad one? Outside of Lana, I can never tell with you Imperial types.”
Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “I think you’re well aware of the fact that it’s a good one after our last conversation.”

“Okay,” Theron said, blushing a little. “Point taken.”

“Now that we’re all reunited,” Lana said, “perhaps we should get things underway.”

“Right, yeah,” Theron nodded. “Let’s get to it.” He turned and led Jhonnen and Vette into the building he’d come out of. “The Revanites are here—on Rishi. That’s why we led you here under false pretenses. They can’t know we’re onto them. We need you to go out there and make life hard for the Revanite’s allies—the Nova Blades.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Do we know what the Revanites are up to?”

“From what we’ve been able to gather, the Revanites’ agents in the Empire and Republic have been feeding the Nova Blades intel on ship activity. The Blades then use that intel to ambush military patrols and key shipping lanes on both sides. They’re essentially remapping hyperroutes”

Jhonnen nodded that he understood, rather than interrupting. His eyes were drawn to the shape of Theron’s mouth briefly before he refocused on the other man’s eyes.

Theron looked at the floor and shook his head. “Hate to admit it, but I haven’t been able to remotely slice the Blade’s computers. I have to have their security shut down.”

“The trouble is,” Lana said. “We can’t have any suspicious raised that our attack is related to the Revanite’s activities.”

Vette nodded. “But if Jhonnen and I hit them as the Howling Tempest Gang, it’s just pirate on pirate violence and no one gets suspicious.”

Jhonnen tensed when Vette called him by his name, expecting surprise or a sneer on Lana’s face. With one little slip up, Lana knew too much. She’d know that Vette was the weak point, the chink in Jhonnen’s armor.

Lana, however, just nodded.

“Yeah,” said Theron. “You’ve got it exactly. Bust up their operations, get their attention, make yourself look legitimate—and then go for the throat.”

“We have a trusted source who’s determined that the Nova Blade’s base, a wrecked ship called the Aggressor contains their entire security apparatus,” Lana said. “That’s our final target.”

“Alright,” Jhonnen said. “Vette and I will need lodgings here, and I want to change on my ship so we look more piratical, but once that’s been handled, what first?”

“That’s the spirit,” Theron announced. “We’ll place you in range of the first Nova Blade target, that’s where our source is waiting.”

Lana actually smiled. “It really is good to see you again.”

“Been hiding out a long time,” agreed Theron. “It’s nice to see someone who isn’t a complete stranger. Good luck out there.”

Jhonnen and Vette left and starting heading towards the dock where their ship was waiting.

“So what happened last time you saw Theron?” Vette asked, walking easily at his side.
“I implied he was attracted to me and he ran away,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “I just figure I’ve been friendly and there’s no reason to assume I wouldn’t be happy to see him besides the fact that I’m a sith lord.”

Vette nodded silently.

They reached the *Sanguine Tide* and headed aboard, splitting off with Vette heading to her room and Jhonnen finding Quinn to fill him in on the situation.

“What would you like me to do, my lord?”

“Return to Dromund Kaas and check in on my assets, it’s important that I’m seen doing stuff at least in the datawork to obfuscate my presence here. I’ll call you when we’re ready to leave.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen headed to his room and pulled on his *most* casual outfit. When he’d finished, Jhonnen looked more like a pirate than a sith. He put extra stuff on his belt to obscure his lightsabers, including an extra blaster from the armory. He waited in the lounge for Vette and his eyes widened when she came out of her room. She’d taken one of her brown pairs of pants and sliced the legs off to make medium length brown shorts that highlighted her long blue legs.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing. You look good. Just… shorts?”

“It’s hot here,” Vette said. “I’ll probably need to go swimming in bug spray, but at least I *look* the part.”

He grinned at her. “You do, you really do.”
Jhonnen and Vette put the boot in to the most obnoxious pirate scum on Rishi and Vette calls out Jhonnen's burgeoning feelings for Theron Shan

Jhonnen and Vette moved through the steamy pirate port and into the coastal valley beyond, moving towards the meeting place with Theron and Lana’s ‘source’. As they drew close they saw the wookie, and Jhonnen bit back a disappointed sigh.

He didn’t like Jakarro. Jakarro was loud and egotistical and Deefour was shrill and cowardly and none of that mattered because they had to work together.

“It’s you!” announced Deefour as Jhonnen and Vette got close. “It’s really you! I can hardly believe my optical circuits!”

“Jakarro, Deefour,” Jhonnen inclined his head politely.

“Welcome to Rishi, my lord,” announced Deefour. “Not exactly the paradise we’d hoped it would be…”

<< The chumps who pass for pirates in this place are a joke, >> insisted Jakarro. << I like the bird ones, though. >>

“All bluster aside, this planet’s inhabitants are not to be trifled with. The Nova Blades in particular are a powerful and organized group. That is why we intend to depower and disorganize them by firing from Jakarro’s ship on the targets of your choosing.”

“I can work with that.” Jhonnen nodded. “But why not just blanket fire over the area?”

“If you are to be implicated as the perpetrator of these acts, you must be seen flagging their assets,” Deefour explained.

<< Here. >> Jakarro handed Jhonnen a small handful of transmitters. << The sooner we finish making a mark with the Nova Blades, the sooner we can get at the Revanites! >>

As Jakarro start to walk away, Deefour shouted. “I’d wish you luck if I thought you’d need it. We’ll be in touch!”

Jhonnen and Vette exchanged looks and Jhonnen tucked the transmitters into a pocket, careful not to activate any of them because that would be… bad. They proceeded deeper into the jungle, grateful that it was moving towards evening because it meant the oppressive heat was clearing a little bit and they were more easily concealed by shadows as they made their way to the Nova Blades’ depot.

They planted the first transmitter and watched from a safe distance as Jakarro’s ship fired and the gathered munitions lit up like fireworks.

“We have to be seen,” Vette said. “And we have to let at least a couple of people report back. Do
you know how to use that blaster?” She gestured to the blaster on his belt.

“Uh… I know the theory,” Jhonnen said, having never actually fired a blaster before in his life.

“Well, I guess they’re going to find out you’re a Force User.”

Jhonnen paused. “Yeah, but I can make myself less recognizable.” Reaching up he took off his jewelry and stuffed the silver into a pocket. His face felt naked and strangely light without the metal.

“How do I look?” he asked Vette, the words catching on the tips of his teeth because he didn’t want to look bad in front of her.

Vette smiled. “I kinda like it. I mean, I know the jewelry is important, but, you look less severe without it.”

He smiled at that. He’d only started wearing the sith jewelry when he turned sixteen and knew that if his father had never found them, he’d probably never have gotten into the habit. Isixia wore gold jewelry, both for cultural reasons and because it made her stand out at work. He thought about taking his hair out of its short ponytail, but didn’t want it falling in his eyes while he was trying to fight.

“Disguised”, Jhonnen and Vette rolled out of cover and took the pirates by surprise. Jhonnen terrified them, drawing their attention and their fire away from Vette. Jhonnen blocked the bolts and sent them back. “I’m Bloody Captain Jhonny!” he shouted. “Leader of the Howling Tempest Gang and there is nothing you can do to stop me!”

Vette snorted a laugh.

When they’d used all but one of the transmitters, Jhonnen and Vette went looking for the person in charge, following a rope walkway up to a makeshift office where the resident commander was speaking panickedly into a holocom to a zabrak in a big hat.

“It’s like a warzone, Commodore! We’re gonna lose everything if we don’t airlift what’s left to the slave camp!”

The zabrak, who appeared to have a beard? How the… whatever. The zabrak commodore shook his head. “We’re not backing down just because some upstart crew thinks they got what it takes to break us. Buckle down! Be a Nova Blade! And kill whoever’s messing with us!”

“But Commodore Margok…”!

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said, holding his ignited lightsabers in front of him. “I invite you to try and kill whomever is messing with you.”

The commander sneered. “I took down a dozen contenders to get this post. I ain’t even a little bit scared of you.”

Vette chuckled. “That’s a mistake.”

The commander drew his blasters and Jhonnen bolted in, he deflect the blasts with his right saber and used the left to bisect the man.

Vette went through his pockets while Jhonnen planted the last transmitter on the large console and they hurried away, heading back through the decimated munitions camp back to the safe house.
They arrived under cover of full dark to find that there were rations waiting for them.

“One of the Nova Blades mentioned a slave camp,” Jhonnen said, sitting down with his dinner. “Apparently it’s pretty remote, but hitting them there would be good. I mean, it’s the right thing to do and it should demoralize them pretty heavily.”

“Good call, actually,” Theron looked moderately surprised, but pleased. “I ran across some chatter about that place.” He took a bite and swallowed. “Basically, anyone in Raider’s Cove who doesn’t give the Nova Blades a slice of their action or whatever gets locked away. Some get put into hazardous labor—like mining—but most are sold as slaves to visitors from offworld. It’s a lucrative business for the Blades.”

Vette wrinkled her nose, distaste written all over her lekku. “It was a lucrative business. We’re shutting them down.”

Theron nodded. “You got that right. You’ll have to slip in with one of the Nova Blades’ cargo shipments. I’m sure the island’s heavily guarded, so try not to get killed.”

Lana sighed and shook her head. I believe what Theron means to say is that he’s concerned for your safety—as am I.”

Jhonnen and Vette spread out on the sleeping mats Theron and Lana had prepared for them and Jhonnen offered Vette the larger of his two pillows.

“I have a pillow.”

“For the back of your legs, or between your knees, to keep your spine straight.”

Vette sighed but took the pillow.

It took a long time for Jhonnen to get to sleep, the safe house was new, they were surrounded by pirates beyond the thin wooden walls, he didn’t have the sound of the engine room or Vette’s heartbeat to focus on, but eventually, he did drift off.

Vette and Jhonnen crowded into a storage crate and waited in silence as it was moved. Jhonnen waited another minute once the crate had landed and then opened it, emerging with Vette on a staging platform.

“Okay, so I think I know how to get the slaves out.” Vette said. She gestured to a large shipping container. “We just have to get Jakarro to fly it out.”

“Good idea,” Jhonnen said. He pulled out his comm and contacted the smuggler, grateful that Jakarro took very little convincing. With an escape route planned, Jhonnen and Vette headed into the slave camp themselves.

Vette caught his elbow. “No jokes, no smart comments… every slaver here—every scumbag who treats people like property—has to die. We have to kill them.”

“I know,” Jhonnen said.

True to his word to Vette, Jhonnen kept his mouth shut while fighting. He went through slavers like butter, pausing only to direct the slaves to the platform where the shipping container to
freedom was waiting or to administer aid in the form of stims to the slave too weakened to run. They were thorough, everyone not wearing a slave collar went down.

Just like when Nok Drayen had rescued Vette.

When Jakarro had successfully carried off the shipping container of former slaves. Vette exhaled. She holstered her blasters and swiped at her eyes. Her lekku were both miserable and relieved. Jhonnen set a hand on her back and didn’t say anything.

What was there to say?

Vette turned and wrapped her arms around Jhonnen’s shoulders. He squeezed her tightly, forehead pressed to her neck. He reached out and twined himself over her thoughts, assuring her that he was here. They were a family. He was never going to leave and she had all the time in the world to process her feelings.

Vette pulled away and smiled at him, a brittle smile. “I need a drink.”

“I think we can afford a drink before we head back to the others,” Jhonnen promised.

They headed back to the Blaster’s Path and got two fairly stiff drinks before settling at a back booth with a good view of the dancers.

Jhonnen sipped his drink while Vette stared at her.

“You going to be alright?” he asked at length.

Vette nodded, though her lekku were less convincing.

“You don’t have to be,” Jhonnen said. “I mean, I’ve been not alright. For most of the time we’ve known each other I’ve been not alright. But… you were there for me and I’ll be here for you.”

She took another drink. “I’m lucky to have you.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

After their drink, Vette at least appeared to be a little better so they returned to the safe house.

After a quick wash in the refresher for both of them, the quartet assembled in the main room of the safehouse to discuss the next step.

“We seem to have been a pretty solid distraction,” Jhonnen said.

“That would be an understatement,” Lana said with a sly smile. “Theron’s been monitoring communications; you’ve caused quite a stir.”

“Want some gratification?” Theron asked, turning to the console. “Here, check this out. Just recorded.”

Margok, who, yes, definitely had a beard, appeared on the holo, shouting at someone. “They’re blasting up my supplies, my foot soldiers! Taking my workers! What are you people prepared to do about it?”

Maybe the beard was a tattoo?

Whatever, it didn’t matter.
A human male in a uniform Jhonnen didn’t recognize but sporting an Imperial accent replied to Margok. “This appears to be your problem, not ours.”

“How would you like it if I made it your personal problem,” spat Margok. “Gimme Revan! I wanna talk to Revan!”

“No,” the Revenite shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Margok snarled. “You don’t put Revan on, the Nova Blades stop rerouting galactic traffic. That ain’t negotiable.”

Margok’s tantrum paid off and Revan, or at least someone wearing Revan’s mask, appeared over the holo. The legendary Jedi/Sith reminded Jhonnen a little bit of Marr, able to communicate displeasure through silence and the mask alone.

He wondered if Marr would have appreciated the comparison or not.

He wondered, but he didn’t care.

“Commodore Margok,” at least it sounded like Revan. Jhonnen was willing to accept that it was Revan. “Are you threatening to alter the terms of our deal?” He sounded unimpressed, not worried. “I paid you to do a job and you’ve done it well. But that’s over now. I no longer have any use for your Nova Blades.”

Margok brought his hands up to barter. “Hey, I know Torch and her gang of Mandalorians up and left us, but the Nova Blades still got a lot to offer.”

Revan shook his head. “Not if you don’t have your own house in order. Put an end to the upstarts causing you trouble and I’ll consider resuming our alliance.”

The holocall ended and Theron turned back around, leaning against the console. He looked Jhonnen up and down. “You really did it. You got them running scared.”

“What’s this about Mandalorians?” Jhonnen asked. “Thanks, by the way.”

“Heard the name Torch before, but not much else. I’m looking into it.” Theron said.

“The Nova Blades still have an impressive roster of hardened criminals at their disposal,” said Lana. “And the Aggressor is still heavily fortified.”

“The Aggressor’s their headquarters,” Theron explained in case Jhonnen had forgotten. “You’ve seen it—a crashed ship Margok turned into a fortress. Can’t get in without the proper security codes.”

“We can handle that.”

Theron nodded. “We’ll get Jakarro to lend a hand all the same.”

“If nothing else,” Lana said with a sly smile. “The activity will keep him from picking apart Deefour any further.”

Jhonnen and Vette had a quick lunch by themselves and then headed out away from Raider’s Cove to find the comm towers that stored security codes and other useful information.

Vette was quiet, keeping pace but not saying much.
Which was fair. She always hated relishing death.

Jhonnen missed Kira, he missed having someone reach for his thoughts when they weren’t feeling well, the invitation to help mattered. He didn’t know if Vette needed comfort or if she needed him to pretend that everything was fine.

So he was floundering, trapped between two choices, unable to make either one.

The path to the comm towers was littered with wildlife, tonitrans, skarlas and krakja, that Jhonnen and Vette had to fight through.

“Nova Blades,” Vette scoffed, clearing her throat and holding her head high like nothing was wrong. “Nova Blades. If I ever start a pirate crew, I’m going to call them the Star Stabbers.”

Jhonnen nodded, continuing through the jungle. “Star Stabbers. Where do I sign up.”

Vette shrugged. “I just assumed you’ll be tagging along.”

“Vette,” Jhonnen said with mock seriousness. “I’d follow you anywhere.”

He meant it, but she’d didn’t need to know that.

Well, she knew it but she didn’t need to know it.

They found the first comm tower and signaled Jakarro, keeping well back as Jakaroo’s ship came in low and blasted the comm tower open, allowing Vette to reach in and grab the decoder module they needed. Jhonnen went through the pockets of the dead Nova Blades and pocketed their credit chits to split between himself, Vette and Quinn later.

They did this a couple more times and then headed for the Aggressor to finally put an end to Margok and the Nova Blades.

Vette plugged the modulators into the communication’s panel in the Aggressor’s main airlock. Theron appeared in miniature over the holo. “Finally in. Nice work. Now to see where Margok’s hiding all his secrets.”

The holo flickered and Margok replaced Theron. He looked at Jhonnen and sneered. “You. You dirty, no-good pirate scum.”

“Well that’s hurtful,” Jhonnen said. “Especially from King Pirate Scum himself. Also, is that a real beard? I know it’s off-topic but it’s bothering me.”

“Yeah, go ahead and laugh it up,” Margok shouted. “Won’t be laughing long. My forebears founded Raider’s Cove. This is my island, and I’m not giving it up. So come on in. Do your worst. In the end, you ain’t coming out alive.”

The holo switched back to Theron and Vette tilted her head to the side. “You know, I almost want to tell him who he’s dealing with.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “Why spoil the surprise?”

“Shit,” Theron swore. “They’ve got live slicers in there managing network security on the fly. I can’t do anything until they’re offline.”

“Well then I’ll take them offline,” Jhonne said, rolling his shoulders back.
Theron smirked. “I’m sure you will.”

The holo went offline.

Vette made a humming noise. “That was… friendly.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “He’s a friendly guy once you get a foothold. I like that about him. Come on.”

They headed into the crashed starship and made their way through it, tearing through the Nova Blades as they went. The slicers had turrets, forcing Jhonnen to hang back and deflect fire from Vette. They closed with the turrets slowly and once they were past the turrets Jhonnen dealt with them while Vette dealt with the slicer and then sliced a foothold for Theron into the console.

They repeated this process, Vette going through pockets for credit chits, until Theron was in the system. Unfortunately, nothing in Jhonnen’s life was simple and he got a call from Theron a moment later.

“Security measures are down,” Theron confirmed. “Trouble is, so’s the network. Margok must’ve shut it down manually.”

“So we’ll turn it back on once we’ve dealt with him,” Jhonnen said, nodding to himself.

Margok was waiting in what had once been the cargo hold, a vast room he’d filled with consoles and other things. Jhonnen and Vette stared down at him from the top of a large staircase.

“This is my ship,” roared Margok, taking aim with an assault cannon. “Think you can just walk on in and be left alive?”

“Actually,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “Yes.”

Margok fired and Jhonnen deflected. When there was a pause in the fire, Jhonnen leapt off the small balcony he and Vette were on and Force tossed Margok into the other pirates, bowling them all over and buying time for Vette to get down the stairs.

“You’ll pay for that!” Margok snarled.

Jhonnen shrugged nonchalantly. He darted forward and sliced clean through Margok’s assault cannon and then drove the other blade through the commodore’s chest before turning and helping Vette with the other pirates. Once everyone was down, Vette wandered over to turn the network back on while Jhonnen went through everyone’s pockets.

“We need to maintain that momentum,” Lana was saying as Jhonnen wandered over to be part of the conversation. “Surely, if the Revanites are done with the Nova Blades as Revan indicated, they’re onto the next stage of their plan.”

“Do we have thoughts as to what that plan is?” Jhonnen asked. “Maybe there’s something in the Nova Blades’ network?”

“I hope so,” Theron said. “I’m starting to feel like flying blind is the new normal.”

Lana gave Jhonnen a small smile. “While Theron’s pulling down data, I suggest you start to make your way back to Raider’s Cove. Hopefully he’ll have found something of use by then.”
“So, are you going to put your jewelry back on?” Vette asked as they entered the safehouse.

Jhonnen reached up and touched his nose like he’d forgotten. He lowered his hand and shrugged. “When I’m certain being recognized won’t blow the whole charade,” he answered. Lana was fiddling with a datapad when they walked in, while Theron worked at the console in the back and Jakarro slouched on some crates like he was bored.

“So, anything?” Jhonnen asked.

Lana put her datapad down. “Very little, I’m afraid. It would appear someone took it upon themselves to corrupt much of the data as a last resort.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen muttered.

“It’s a real mess,” Theron said, coming away from the console. “Getting fragments, but nothing incredibly coherent. The one thing that does keep turning up is the Mandalorian Margok brought up earlier—the one they call Torch.”

“What about her?”

“Well,” Theron leaned back against the table. “It looks like Torch and Margok were thick as thieves for a while, then something happened. Had to do with the Revanites. Don’t really know the details, but it looks like Torch moved her whole clan to another island here on Rishi. I’ve got the coordinates.”

“Sending me away?” Jhonnen chuckled. “Am I distracting you?”

Theron shrugged. “You’re not entirely wrong.”

Lana shook her head. “I’m sending Jakarro out on a scouting run; I’ve made local arrangements for your transportation should he not return in time.”

“Wow,” said Theron. “You’ve been busier than I thought.”

Lana gave the slightest, most delicate shrug of her thin shoulders and kept her attention on Jhonnen. “Get whatever information you can from the Mandalorians. With any luck, they’ll lead us to the Revanites.”

“That sounds like a tomorrow adventure,” Jhonnen said. “I don’t particularly fancy wandering around Raider’s Cove in the dark.”

“Probably wise,” Theron agreed,

Jhonnen’s holo beeped. He held up a hand to excuse himself and wandered into the hallway, hoping it was Quinn with an update.

Darth Vowrawn smiled at him instead. “My dear friend the Wrath,” Vowrawn said warmly. Jhonnen was suddenly very aware that he wasn’t wearing any of his jewelry. “Always a pleasure to see you intact.”

“Well,” Jhonnen said as gracefully as the surprise would let him. “This is a surprise.”

“Well, what’s life without a few surprises? There are matters I’d like to discuss in person, and I happen to be near the Rishi System. Perhaps we can meet? Enjoy a respite from the bloodshed and destruction?”
“Of course, Darth Vowrawn. In the morning.”

Vowrawn nodded. “I’ll send you the coordinates to my lodging once I have them.”

Jhonnen put his comm back into his pocket and walked back into the room where everyone else was waiting. “Vowrawn tracked me here, I don’t know why but I don’t think he’s a Revanite. He wants to meet in the morning and I couldn’t think of a good excuse to tell him no.”

“We can manage around the delay,” Lana assured him.

Jhonnen felt his face again and then move into the room where he and Vette were sleeping and took his jewelry out of his pocket.

“Here,” Vette said, kneeling across from him. “Let me.”

Jhonnen held still as Vette put his jewelry on his face, the intricately carved bracket over the bridge of his nose, then the piercings on the sides of his nostrils, finally she turned his face one way and then the other for the long carved piercings that cupped the shells of his ears.

Her hands cupped his cheeks for a moment before falling away. “There,” she gave him a smile. “Fearsome as ever.”

“So somewhere between a gizka and a damp towel?” Jhonnen countered

“Closer to gizka today.”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s a compliment.”

She laughed. And then the laughing stopped and she gave him a concerned look. “So… Theron. You really like him, don’t you. Not like with Cytharat, I mean.”

Jhonnen blinked. “I… I don’t think it’s the same kind of situation? Cytharat was handsome and the kiss was nice but I didn’t really see myself holding a conversation with the guy.”

“But you do with Theron?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “It’s too early to tell really but…” he lowered his voice in case Theron was eavesdropping. “I think I could like him a whole lot.”

“He’s a Republic agent,” Vette reminded him. “When this is over… assuming we all survive anyhow, he’ll be gone or you’ll be enemies again.”

Jhonnen gave a nod. “And that’s sad because, yeah, I really think I could like him.”

Vette’s lekku were unhappy, but she shook her head when Jhonnen opened his mouth to ask why. “We should turn in.”

Jhonnen stared at her, wondering what he’d done, and then laid down on his mat to sleep.

First thing in the morning, Jhonnen and Vette went to see Darth Vowrawn. He was waiting for them by himself in a small hovel, two facts which didn’t make Jhonnen feel any better about things.

“My good Wrath,” Vowrawn said. “You look the same as ever. How many Jedi have you slain today?”
It felt like a jibe about the jewelry. Jhonnen kept it off his face. “Good to see you.”

“In all seriousness—how are you?” Vowrawn cooed like a mother hen. “I understand you’ve been working tirelessly for our Empire. Is it satisfying, your craft? Putting down Hutts and cults here and there?”

“I’m a tireless servant of the Empire,” Jhonnen gave the canned response and wondered how much Vowrawn knew or thought he knew.

Vowrawn chuckled. “I know, and I admire your handiwork—yet I worry for your future. The Republic claims the Emperor is dead, but I hear rumors to the contrary. The game pieces are moving.”

The danger with Vowrawn was that he was so believable in his amiability. He genuinely sounded concerned for Jhonnen’s well being.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Consider this: the last Wrath of the Emperor served in that position for centuries, only departing after turning traitor. As I understand, you never chose to become the Wrath—the position was thrust upon you. What is it you truly desire?”

Jhonnen thought about it. What he wanted was to leave. Take Vette, take Quinn if he’d come and leave. Do something else. Maybe become a free trader.

And he couldn’t admit that to Vowrawn. Not in a million years.

“I like the challenge,” he lied. “It keeps me sharp.”

“Through victory, my chains are broken,” recited Vowrawn. “There is no victory without contest.” Vowrawn smiled. “I have a gift to aid your endeavors. I have come upon indications that you are being watched, and have been for some time. “ Vowrawn moved to the console and brought up a holo of a strange looking droid. “These spies are mechanical, but ingeniously hidden using combinations of ancient and modern technology, welded into form using the Force.”

This was a problem indeed. He didn’t act like a Sith when he wasn’t being watched and he couldn’t imagine the sort of damage a spy could do with information about how he really was. They could prove to the Dark Council that he wasn’t the tireless servant he pretended to be. And they would take it out on Vette and Quinn. And that would be more effective that physically carving his heart out and feeding it to him.

And if it was someone with ties to the Revanites, he was endangering Lana and Theron.

Even without ties to the Revanites, he’d endangered Lana, she had a death mark from the Empire.

“How…” Jhonnen cleared his throat. “No, I suppose you won’t answer that while we might be being observed. Do you know who’s behind it?”

“Who is a mystery to me,” said Vowrawn, fishing something out of his robes. “But we can find answers. An associate of mine with connections in the Gree Enclave manufactured this: a device to reveal your foe.” He handed it over. “Use it to reclaim your privacy if you wish… to look upon the face of your watchers.”

“How’s it work?”
“Activation is simple, but I’d draw your foes somewhere remote—the jungle perhaps—to avoid interference. There is more I’d offer you, but not until I’m certain we are alone.”

“I’ll handle the spies and meet you back here?”

Vowrawn nodded. “I will remain on Rishi as long as I can. Good hunting, Wrath.”

Jhonnen inclined his head and then left the hovel, Vette at his side. He thought about asking her to run back and warn Lana but didn’t like the idea of a beautiful twi’lek roaming Raider’s Cove by herself. Vette was more than capable, but it seemed like a bad scene best avoided.

They headed into the jungle as Vowrawn had suggested, walking in silence because even though nothing had likely changed, now they knew someone was listening in.

By the coastline, Jhonnen activated the device.

Three of the droids appeared. One said in a high, tinny voice. “The Wrath can see! Do not permit this!”

Jhonnen cut them down and drew deeper into the jungle and tried it again. And then moved. And again. Until no droids appeared when he activated the device. He exchanged glances with Vette and headed back to meet up with Vowrawn.

“Crazy that someone’s been keeping tabs on you,” Vette said.

“I should have suspected it,” Jhonnen shook his head. “I’m sorry, you’ve been in danger this whole time because of me and I—”

Vette clapped a hand down on his shoulder. “It’s alright. Breathe.”

He took a breath.

They returned to the hovel and found… Servant One. Servant One who was clearly not Darth Vowrawn.

Jhonnen ground his teeth together before he spoke. “Servant One.”

“Wrath. This explains much. You should not have destroyed the Opticrons. The droids exist so that we may know you. You exist so that you may serve our master.”

“I am more than a tool,” Jhonnen snapped, surprising himself. “I dislike being spied on.”

“You are an instrument of our master’s will,” said Servant One. “Perhaps you have spent too much time serving among the fleets and the Dark Council. First Ilum, then Makeb, and on the list goes… what does not threaten the Emperor is not your concern. We fear you forget this.”

“I would rather help people than do nothing.” Which wasn’t exactly true. He hadn’t wanted to be part of Ilum and Makeb, but like hell was he going to stand there and be dictated at.

Servant One inhaled. “We are at a delicate juncture. Your past choices are of mixed merit; trust that we will inform you when you are needed.” He folded his hands behind him. “Now, I understand Darth Vowrawn sought to meet you here. He has committed crimes against the Hand.”

“What has he done?”

“He sought to learn our secrets and interrogated a Servant. We believe he is fleeing to the
unmapped stars of the Rishi Maze. Did he reach you? If he left this world only recently, we might still find him.”

“He did not,” Jhonnen lied. “I felt a presence and chose to investigate.”

“Then our search must continue. He will not elude the Hand forever.” Servant One unfolded his hands and dropped them to his sides. “We will not ask that you stay your saber and return to the tranquility of our fortress. Your edge must not be dulled. Have faith that all questions, all concerns, will shortly be resolved. The Emperor is returning, and we will fuel his flame.”

That didn’t sound good. In fact the return of the Emperor sounded like the antithesis of what Jhonnen wanted. The Emperor would use him or worse decide that Jhonnen was too willful to be a tool and subsume him. Like he did with his Voices. Leave nothing behind of who those people had been.

“I will obey,” Jhonnen lied.

“Then we chose well. Be ready, Mighty Wrath. Soon you will fulfil your true destiny.” Servant One left. Jhonnen and Vette were quiet for a long time before he leaned back against the console and slid to the ground, pulling his hand over his face.

“You alright?” Vette asked.

“Give me a minute,” Jhonnen said, his breath shaking. “That was… a whole thing. And the Emperor returning. I just… I need a minute.”

She sat down next to him. “Then take a minute. I’ll be right here.”

“Thanks Vette,” Jhonnen said. He didn’t tell her that she was his everything, or even that her presence helped, but he did tilt his head to rest in on her shoulder.

“We’ve still gotta go talk to Torch today,” Jhonnen complained. “Hells, it’s not even lunchtime.”

Vette tilted her head to sit on top of his, her lekku falling over his shoulder. “It can be lunchtime,” she said gently. “Let’s go get lunch.”
Jhonnen and Vette leave to have a word with the mysterious Torch. It goes about as well as anything else has.

Lana’s contact provided Jhonnen and Vette with a simple shuttlecraft and a warning not to scratch it. This warning played loudly in Jhonnen’s head as an anti-aircraft cannon on Torch’s island fired and the shuttle started to shake on it’s rapid and unplanned descent.

Jhonnen threw the Force out in all directions around himself and Vette but still got jostled around badly as the nose hit soil and skidded several meters.

“Vette?” Jhonnen groaned, feeling out with his thoughts to find her.


Jhonnen unbuckled and inched out of the craft, offering a hand to help Vette out.

Vette rubbed the small of her back and then rolled her shoulders back. “The Mandalorian compound is that way,” she pointed into the jungle. “I saw it before we got shot down.”

“Yeah. Getting home is going to be… interesting.” Jhonnen rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess we’ll figure that out when we’ve learned what we can from Torch.”

Which worried Jhonnen. Mandalorians, from what his father had taught him, weren’t the most cooperative of people. Now, Jhonnen didn’t necessarily believe a lot of the things Vitreous had taught him, but there were kernels of truth in it. The evil bastard had actually been trying to let his son get ahead.

“So, is it just me or has the novelty of shuttle crashes officially worn off?” asked Vette.

Jhonnen nodded. “How’s your back?”

“Hurts,” Vette shrugged one shoulder. “I’ll live.”

They moved through the jungle until Jhonnen felt presences around them and reached out to touch Vette’s thoughts to warn her, giving her precious seconds before the mandalorians uncloaked. Combat was quick and dirty but Jhonnen tried to leave as many of the Mandalorians alive as possible, they needed Torch to cooperate.

“Hey, here’s the door,” Vette said. She pushed on the metal and the door swung open.

Jhonnen went first, holding his red lightsaber ahead of him like a torch. The narrow passageway opened into a round suspended platform with stairs straight across and light bridges connected to doors around the rim. Three of the lightbridges were active, three lightbridges were turned off.

A woman’s voice echoed through the room. “Made it inside. Huh. Don’t know what you’re doing in our compound, but since you’re here, let’s see what you’re made of.”
“What does that mean?” asked Vette.

Jhonnen sighed. “Trials. Each of the activated lightbridges will give us a test of some form. When we pass the tests, we can see Torch.” He paused. “Hopefully.”

“So we just… pick a door?” Vette said.

“After you.”

Vette picked a door and they made their way through it, using Jhonnen’s red lightsaber as a torch through the narrow passage. The passage opened up into a pit with a gently sloping path into it. The bones, some of them quite large, were not comforting. Vette drew her blasters, falling just a few steps behind Jhonnen as they descended into the pit.

A roar echoed and Jhonnen slid into his stance, watching as a towering shape emerged from a cave in the side of a pit.

He scowled. How had the Mandalorians captured, much less transferred, a damn rancor? The beast roared again and Jhonnen dashed forward. He slid between the rancor’s legs and slashed at its ankles while Vette fired into its face. The rancor swung with one meaty arm and Jhonnen jumped up on its fist and stuck a lightsaber into its arm to use as a step up onto its back. He drove the other lightsaber through the creature’s neck and rolled off of it, coming back up onto his feet near Vette.

They waited for the rancor to get up again. When it didn’t, Jhonnen walked back over and reclaimed his weapons.

“Exciting,” Vette said. “So, any more thought about you and Theron?”

Jhonnen blinked at her. “Not really. I mean, you’re right, even if we hit it off we’re probably going to go back to being enemies when this crisis is over but… still.” He shrugged.

“Still?”

Jhonnen sighed. “If he likes me I feel like I’d be an idiot not to go for it.”

Vette hummed and started back up the slope to the mandalorian compound, forcing Jhonnen to keep up.

“I don’t know why it bothers you,” Jhonnen said. And then he considered. “Look, I promise I’ll be careful, I’m not looking to get my heart broken.”

Vette turned and stared at him like he was an idiot, and then her lekku shifted to something more sympathetic and her face softened. “You are really dumb.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I get that a lot.”

They returned to the central room and the woman over the intercom sounded almost approving. “Well, look at you. Might actually be a challenge.”

Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “My turn to pick a door?”

Vette nodded. “That would be fair.”

He looked at the two that were left and, figuring he’d have to go through each of them in time, picked the one he was standing closest too and lead Vette through it.
The passage revealed a jungle pen, and in it a whole mess of tonitrans. They finished and headed back inside to more faint praise from probably Torch and undertook their last trial, a mess of lurkers.

“What is this even proving?” Vette asked. “That we really wanna talk to Torch?”

“It’s a Mandalorian thing.” Jhonnen answered. “I don’t know what that means precisely, but yeah, a Mandalorian thing.”

“Great, loads more confident now,” Vette rolled her eyes as she said it. She stopped outside the main chamber and rubbed her lower back, hissing with pain.

Jhonnen put a hand on her shoulder. “Would a back massage help?”

Vette closed her eyes. “Probably. Do you know how to give a back massage?” She opened her eyes and looked at him.

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’m eager to learn. I’ll try tonight, you can always tell me if I suck at it.”

She smiled at him. “You’re dumb, but I like you.”

“That is literally all I want.” And he meant it in a grand, cosmic way, but Vette didn’t need to know that.

“Done pretty well for yourselves,” said Torch as Vette and Jhonnen entered the main room again. “But you’re in the arena now. Meet Jos and Valk. Husband and wife. Tough as durasteel, undefeated and still eager to prove themselves.”

A pair of Mandalorians landed on the circular platform. Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Vette complained, aiming her blasters.

Jhonnen launched himself at Jos, and swung, lightsaber connecting with and bouncing off the man’s breastplate.

Cortosis, or something like it.

Jhonnen dodged a swipe and dropped, knocking Jos to the ground to trap him in a sleeper hold. Valk landed and aimed a flamethrower at his face, her armor deflecting the bolts from Vette’s blaster. Jhonnen twisted out of the way, staying as behind Jos as he could, using his small size to his advantage.

“Get away from him!” Vette shouted, aiming for Valk’s face to blind or distract her.

Valk growled something in mando’a and turned to deal with Vette, giving Jhonnen the opening to toss husband into wife and sending them both sprawling. He picked himself up and kneed Valk in the face as she tried to pick herself up, his patella protesting as it met durasteel. But it knocked her off balance. He kicked her when she was down and turned his attention to Jos as he struggled upright. Jhonnen lashed out with the Force and blasted Jos off the platform and into the wall of stone. He plummeted and Valk took off to catch him in case he was too stunned to use his jet pack. She rose up holding him and took her helmet off. “We yield.”

Jhonnen unignited his lightsabers.

Vette came up on the other side of him. “Sorry I was basically useless.”
“You kept Valk distracted, that was very useful.”

Torch’s voice echoed into the room again. “Have to hand it to you, that was something. Think it’s time we met.”

Jhonnen tried not to limp as they headed up the stairs. He ignored the pain the way he had been taught to ignore pain. He hadn’t cracked the knee, which was good, it was just brusied, he could walk on it, he could fight on it, he just didn’t want to.

They made it to a room with a grated floor, beneath was a swirling pool of magma. A woman on the other side, stalked over, a real floor materializing in front of her feet.

_Dramatic_, Jhonnen thought with a twinge of annoyance. He didn’t have _time_ for dramatic.

“Torch, right?” Jhonnen said as the woman came close.

The woman took her helmet off and shook out her red-orange hair. Her face was weathered, putting in her late forties, maybe early fifties if she’d aged gracefully. “Shae Vizla,” she said. “That little nickname the locals came up with, hell if I know why.”

“Probably the amount of fire, just a guess,” Vette quipped.

Jhonnen hid a smile. He cleared his throat, trying to ignore the smell of heat in his nostrils. “I understand you recently had a falling out with the Nova Blades and the Revanites, I need to know what happened.”

“Right, because I never had a Sith try to assert themselves before,” Vizla scoffed.

“Wait… I wasn’t—”

“Tell you what: instead of whatever grand gesture of cooperation you thought might happen here, why don’t we try something a little different? Been a while since I’ve had a decent challenge. I’m taking this opportunity to show my clan how it’s done.”

“Son of a _bitch._”

Vizla put her helmet back on and Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers. After a beat to make sure everyone was ready, Jhonnen juked forward, He lashed at her leg and his lightsaber connected with metal.

More cortosis or something like it.

So he wasn’t going to beat her with the lightsabers. But her armor wasn’t metal everywhere. There were gaps and weak points for maneuverability, he just had to find one and exploit it.

Vizla fired at him and Jhonnen deflected. Vette moved around behind her and took pot shots, the majority of which bounced off Vizla’s back. Vizla brought her flamethrower up and Jhonnen smacked it away with one of his lightsabers so the stream went over his shoulder. He cried out as his vest crackled and his skin burned, but he pressed the assault, bearing Vizla to the ground.

The floor moved. The tile he and Vizla were wrestling on and Jhonnen rolled clear, back onto a safe tile as heat battered his senses.

“Vette!”

“Fine!” Vette shouted from another safe tile.
Vizla took to the air.

Jhonnen growled. He hooked one of his lightsabers on his belt and reached out with his free hand to grab the flying mandalorian with the Force. He hurled her into a wall and grabbed her again before she could recover, slamming her into the floor.

Vizla lay on the floor for a long moment, long enough for Jhonnen to sprint across the room and grab her flag. He chucked it at her and the floor resumed being a proper floor.

Vizla picked herself up. She shook her head and removed her helmet, working her jaw like it was sore. “Son of a… Okay, so I’m a little rustier than I’d like to admit—but just a little. Felt good to be in a real scrap for once.”

“What do you know about the Revanites?” Jhonnen asked.

Vizla nodded. “We helped out the Blades to have a good relationship with Raider’s Cove. We didn’t sign up for the Revanites and their all-out war, so we bailed.”

“I thought war was what Mandalorians did?” Jhonnen furrowed his brow with the question.

Vizla shrugged. “There’s a difference between a good war and a bad war, this one was looking like a bad one.”

“So where can I find the Revanites?”

“Afraid I don’t have a where to give you, but I can clue you in on a what: a whole fleet of ships they’ve got parked somewhere around here. I wouldn’t mind it a bit if you chased the Revanites out of Rishi. Off-the-radar is just how we like it here. Good hunting to you, Sith.”

She left, hollering for her clan as she did but before she got too far away, Jhonnen hollered. “Can we borrow a shuttle? You shot ours down.”

“There’re plenty of vehicles around,” Vizla shrugged. “Pick one.”

Lana’s contact was less than pleased about the destruction of his shuttle, but he was mollified somewhat by being given a new one. Jhonnen limped back to the safehouse, Vette on high alert in case someone tried to take advantage of his weakened state.

“Remind me to never again knee a fully armored Mandalorian in the face,” Jhonnen grumbled.

Vette smiled. “I’ll do my best.”

They heard Jakarro shouting before they were even inside the safehouse and Jhonnen hobbled as fast as he could inside.

<< I would have made that shot with my eyes and the droid’s eyes shut! Stupid Sith! >>

Jhonnen and Vette turned the corner as Lana retorted. “I understand your frustration, Jakarro, but there’s only so much of your bluster I’m prepared to take.”

“What’s happened?” Jhonnen asked, looking around the safehouse. “And where’s Theron?”

“Theron’s been captured by the Revanites,” Lana said calmly. “Data from the Nova Blades hinted at the location of a Revanites safehouse in Raider’s cover. We looked into it and were ambushed.”
“He wasn’t killed? So we can stage a rescue.”

“Sit down,” Vette instructed.

Jhonnen lowered himself into a chair obediently, face turned expectantly up at Lana while Vette knelt down and produced a medpac for his knee.

Lana nodded. “Whatever the case, I stand by my decision to not impede in Theron’s abduction—and I know Theron would, too. Now he’s in a position to do what he does.”

Jhonnen’s face went blank before it contorted with rage. “You let them take him? Lana, they will torture him to learn what he knows about our operation.”

<< Where I come from, we value our allies! >> roared Jakarro. << We do not let them become imprisoned. >>

“Did you consult Theron about this? Was he aware that you’d leave him or did he expect you to help?” Jhonnen growled.

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving him with the Revanites,” Lana said peaceably. “After all, we need to know what he’s learned whilst in captivity.” Jhonnen inhaled to shout at her, but Lana kept talking. “Hopefully you fared better with the Mandalorians.”

Jhonnen let go of the angry breath he was holding. “Not considerably. There’s a Revanite fleet somewhere nearby but Torch didn’t know where and didn’t seem to care. Callous women seems to be a theme today. Not including Vette.”

Lana didn’t look perturbed. “Of course,” she said with a small nod. “From examining the Nova Blades’ data, it looks as though they’ve been routing Imperial and Republic fleets here to Rishi.”

Jhonnen’s frown deepened, creasing between his brows. “So the Empire and Republic are drawn into a full-scale battle and the Revanites handle whomever’s left. Shit.”

“And we still don’t know who we can trust,” Lana said.

*Present company included,* Jhonnen thought.

“We need to interfere with the Revanites’ plans,” she said. “If not stop them outright.”

<< The droid knows where they are. >>

“Yes,” Deefour sounded pleased with himself. “It’s true. I was able to pinpoint several communications originating from another island. I’m told there’s a Rishii village on the outskirts. I can’t imagine they would resent our presence there.”

“That’s probably where they’re holding Theron then. We should move quickly.”

“I’ll tear down our operation here and meet you in the Rishii village,” Lana said. “I won’t be long. We have to assume Revan’s expecting a resistance force now; you should expect to find patrols along the way.”

<< Tear into the Revanites, but try to save some for me. >>

Jhonnen nodded and stood up, gingerly putting weight on his knee and then standing straight. He and Vette left the safehouse and she knocked her arm into his. “That was… pretty brutal.”
He nodded.

“I guess I spend so much time with you that I forgot what a real Sith was like.”

That earned a small, wry smile from Jhonnen. “Most Sith aren’t that brutally practical. They’d have let Theron get kidnapped but it would have been to get rid of him.”

“We’ll rescue him,” she assured him.

Jhonnen nodded. “Thanks, Vette. I needed to hear that.”

She knocked her elbow into his arm again. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Jhonnen tried to call Quinn and couldn’t get a signal through. He tried calling the Sanguine Tide and then Quinn’s personal communicator. Nothing.

Visions filled his head of Quinn exploding. The ship being taken by pirates or the Dark Council. Quinn left floating in the black or imprisoned by enemies Jhonnen didn’t even know he had. Maybe Vitreous’s apprentices had finally lashed out.

“Hey!” Vette called. “Ride’s leaving.”

Jhonnen frowned and tucked his comm away.

“How’s Captain No-Fun?”

Jhonnen shrugged, still frowning. “I couldn’t get a signal through.”

“Like… at all?”

“At all,” Jhonnen said. “I hope he’s okay.”

She touched his shoulder to offer comfort. “Let’s wrap this quickly and find out.”

“Yeah… thanks Vette.”

They fought Revanites on the coastline and up into the jungle until they’d reached the outskirts of the Rishii village. Jhonnen tucked his lightsabers back onto his belt and looked for someone who could rent him a house.

He found a Rishii near the outskirts and he and Vette made their way over.

“Oh, hi,” Jhonnen gave a slight wave.

“You’re new,” the Rishii said in an old, creaking voice.

Jhonnen nodded. “Yes. I don’t suppose you’re in charge?”

“We don’t really operate that way,” answered the Rishii. “But I can act as that sort of figure if you require it of me. How might I help?”

Okay,” Vette said under her breath. “I admit it—the Rishii terrify me. Just look at those beaks! I’m going to have nightmares about being snapped up and eaten.”

Jhonnen gave her hand a squeeze, dropping it as they came up on the lone Rishii.

“Uh, hi,” Jhonnen gave a slight wave.

“You’re new,” the Rishii said in an old, creaking voice.

Jhonnen nodded. “Yes. I don’t suppose you’re in charge?”

“We don’t really operate that way,” answered the Rishii. “But I can act as that sort of figure if you require it of me. How might I help?”
“We and a couple of friends are looking to stay in or near the village, if that’s alright.”

“Do what you like. No Rishii will have an issue with your presence.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Is there an empty hut?”

“Yes. Just up the path here, should be obvious.”

Jhonnen opened his mouth to say thank you, when Jakarro’s familiar warble broke through the early evening air.

<< More bird people. >>

“I suppose now that we’ve left Raider’s Cove you’re going to start complaining about them instead of the pirates,” muttered Deefour.

<< No—those pirates are still the worst. >>

“You cleared the path well,” Lana praised and Jhonnen turned to greet them. “And made a friend?”

“I am called Arankau,” said the Rishii.

“Do you know the other people on the island?” Jhonnen asked. “What they’re up to or anything?”

Arankau shook his head. “If an individual Rishii chooses to get involved with others, that’s that Rishii’s choice. Otherwise, we tend to see no reason to inquire.”

This was a lovely little island, Jhonnen decided. He couldn’t imagine how nice it would be to have people leave his business alone.

“These other inhabitants,” said Arankau. “They have also kept to themselves. Strangely, their encampment appears to be segregated. One group looks like her,” he pointed at Lana. “The other is less… intense.”

Jhonnen smiled a little, pleased that he wasn’t the example Arankau had used of the Imperial encampment. He wasn’t intense and Jhonnen chose to be pleased about that. Very pleased.

“Sounds like they’re still wary of one another,” Jhonnen said.

Lana nodded. “This may provide an opportunity—either to exact atonement for their deception, or to employ a little deception of our own.”

“It’s an opportunity to thin the ranks, is what it is,” said Deefour determinedly.

Lana gave another small smile. “Your zeal for making heads roll never ceases to surprise me, Deefour. Don’t worry yourself; it may yet come to that.”

Jhonnen frowned. He was tired and if he tried to act while tired he would make mistakes. But he didn’t want to leave Theron in the grasp of the Revanites a second longer than he had to.

But mistakes could get Vette injured or dead.

“I’ll investigate the Revanite camps with Vette in the morning,” Jhonnen said. I need to meditate and rest for a while first.”

“Yes, my lord,” Lana said. “While you’re investigating the camps, we’ll try to establish a better grasp of the Revanite’s activities.”
“I hope we can establish where Agent Shan is being held,” said Deefour as Jakarro started to lead the way up the path.

“As do I,” Lana agreed.

Well, thought Jhonnen bitterly, maybe you shouldn’t have let them abduct him then.

The Rishii hut was small but had a console in the back which was most of what they needed. Jhonnen and Vette made up beds in the back corner. Jhonnen closed his eyes to meditate, wishing he knew Theron well enough to reach out and find him through the Force.

After a while, Vette touched his arm. “Hey,” she said gently. “Sleep. We can set out before dawn if we get to sleep now.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Good thought, but I promised you a backrub first.” He gestured to his mat. Vette laid down on her stomach, hands folded under her cheek. Jhonnen straddled her, sitting on her ass as he rolled her shirt up to her shoulders so he could get at the whole of her back.

It was possible to heal through the Force but Jhonnen had never tried. All he’d been taught to use the Force for was destructive, at least since leaving Nar Shaddaa. He smoothed his hands up Vette’s back, careful to keep the pressure consistent so he wasn’t prodding her. He’d rubbed his own shoulders so he sort of knew what to look for. Vette had her scars. The most prominent was the vertical one on her spine from the surgery, but there were others, thin ones and thick ones. She made a small pleased noise and so he kept doing what he was doing, committed to massaging with the same single-mindedness he usually reserved for his combat drills. When Vette was sleeping he eased off of her and moved to his mat, laying down to sleep himself.
Unlikely Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen is offered new perspective on the Vette situation and oversees the formation of a cross-faction coalition

It was not quite dawn when Jhonnen and Vette left the small Rishii hut. They headed deeper into the jungle, moving silently and sticking close together until they reached the first encampment.

“I guess the good news is: the Empire and the Republic can get along,” Vette said in a low voice. “The bad news is we have to join a murder cult.”

“See, I thought the murder cult I had to join to stop Baras was bad. These guys are new levels of snake-fucking-crazy.”

They snuck closer, learning that the south camp, the one they were at, was Imperial.

“Be patient, Sergeant,” said a man as Jhonnen and Vette concealed themselves at the top of the stairs to the bunker. “As soon as we have word from Revan, our work begins.”

Jhonnen recognized the speaker, actually, a lord in Marr’s service.

Which means he’d probably recognize Jhonnen.

Jhonnen straightened and stood at the top of the stairs, descending cockily as he tried to radiate *Sith*, wearing the mask his father had wanted for him.

“Lord Ivress, Sir!” said the sergeant, whom Jhonnen recognized from Tython and Korriban. “There’s… it’s…”

“The Emperor’s Wrath?” Lord Ivress gawked. “Here?” He cleared his throat. “We’re found out. I suppose Darth Marr sent you to fight his battle for him. Seems his usual way.”

Jhonnen agreed silently.

“No,” Ivress shook his head. “Better still: you learned about us and thought Marr could be in on it. You’re here on your own. We have the upper hand.”

“Very few people have the upper hand against me,” Jhonnen said darkly. “Surrender.”

“You’re bluffing. Strike at us now, and you won’t make it out of the camp alive.”

“It would be very exciting, I grant you. But you’d be the first to go, and then I’ll deal with the Sergeant. Care to wager your life on the outcome?”

“If I may say, my lord,” wheedled the Sergeant. “He does make a convincing argument.”

Ivress stroked his chin, looking at the floor. “It does seem we’ve been less than a step ahead for some time now. Opposition at our heels and in the shadows…” He looked up at Jhonnen. “You’ll get no further resistance from me. I can’t vouch for every last Imperial Revanite, of course, but I
can speak for those present.”

“And the Republic army in the other camp?”

Ivress cleared his throat. “Captain Milenec’s Republic contingent? Whatever your move, you’ll have my fighters at your back. Ultimately we are loyal to the Empire.”

Jhonnen didn’t believe them, but he didn’t sense any lies. He nodded once and turned, sweeping back up the stairs to where Vette had been waiting to back him up.

They got away from the camp before Jhonnen exhaled and dropped the mask. “At least we have to kill half as many people.”

Vette nodded. “You gonna keep wearing your Sith face?”

“Until we lose the Revanites and head home, yeah.”

Vette nodded. “Alright, my lord.”

Jhonnen hated it, but she was right. He drew himself up to his full, if unimpressive, height and lead the way to the northern bunker, carving his way through the Republic Revanites for the benefit of the Imperial Revanites who may or may not have been following them.

“There have been reports of skirmishes in the area,” said the Republic Captain. Jhonnen watched Ivress’s people move into position silently. “I want you to stay alert for anything out of the ordinary.”

“Do I count?” Jhonnen asked.

“By the stars,” the Captain whirled around. “Be ready to fire on my mark!”

Jhonnen brought a hand up and the Imperial Revanites rushed out in front of him. “Fire!”

The Captain was left standing, backed up to the table. “You… you’ve got Ivress’s people! You’ve turned him against the cause?”

Jhonnen nodded. “The Sith are ultimately self-serving, I thought you knew that.”

“Whatever you think you’ve accomplished, you won’t stop Revan. I promise you.”

“Where can I find him? We have much to… discuss.”

“I…” the captain swallowed. “I don’t know where Revan is; not for sure. But there’s a stronghold. In the valley. It’s where they took Theron Shan. I swear,” he brought both hands up like he could stop Jhonnen from doing something terrible. “It’s the best information I have. And I can’t ask up the chain; they’ll only grow suspicious of me.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Get offworld.” He looked at the Imperial Revanites. “All of you. If I see you again, you’re dead.”

Once the bunker was empty, Jhonnen lifted a hand to his ear. “Lana, Theron’s being held in a stronghold in the valley. Also Revan might be there.”

“I’ll have Deefour see what the Rishii know about it. We’ll work out a plan of attack once you’ve returned.”
Jhonnen lowered his hand and looked at Vette. “Let’s move, we’ll lose any tailers in the jungle and get back home.”

“Yes, my lord.”

They headed into the jungle and waited, Jhonnen feeling out through the Force for anyone watching them. When he felt nothing they took a roundabout way back to the village, relaxing once the huts came into view.

“So, dropping the Sith act?” Vette asked.

“Like it’s red hot,” Jhonnen said, tilting his head back to the noonday sun. “I hate it when you call me ‘my lord’.”

Vette chuckled. “You don’t get annoyed when Quinn calls you ‘my lord’.”

“Well yeah, that’s Quinn being Quinn. He’s not…” Jhonnen cleared his throat. “He’s not you.”

Vette cocked an eyebrow at him and pursed her lips with a sneaky smile. “What’s different about me?”

Jhonnen laughed. “Everything, and you know it so don’t play dumb. You’re bad at it.”

Vette sighed. “You’re dumb.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen agreed. “Yes I am.”

They headed into the hut that was their new base of operations where Lana and Jakarro were waiting.

“I’ve never met a people quite like the Rishii,” Lana said. “Pragmatic, accommodating, reasonable—if it wasn’t for the climate, I’d consider staying.”

“I love it here,” Jhonnen admitted. “Also there’s a variety of weather conditions which is more than you can say for Dromund Kaas.”

“Really?” Lana cocked a challenging eyebrow. “New seat of the Empire, maybe.”

Jhonnen recoiled, disgust clear on his face before he could catch it.

Lana didn’t comment. “As I mentioned earlier, I did acquire some information worth noting. Rishii observations surrounding the Revanite stronghold fit what we know: they’re holding powerful warships on standby, and they’re well protected.”

“What do we know about Theron?” Jhonnen asked, more concerned with that than with warships.

“Nothing. All we know is what you were told; that he’s been taken there. We’ve been unable to reach the Imperial fleet nearing Rishi, but I can confirm from the Nova Blades datalogs that Darth Marr’s flagship is another.”

“Try Marr’s direct frequency, I have it.”

“I’m working to remap the interference patterns into a code that protocol droids on approaching ships should be able to decipher,” said Deefour. “If they’re any good.”

“Press on,” Lana said to Jhonnen. “Stall their ships if you can, and we’ll do what we can from here
to reach the fleet and lend support as needed.”

Jakarro complained, << This technical junk would be much easier with Theron around! >>

“I’m no pushover, but you aren’t joking,” Deefour agreed. “We do hope Agent Shan is recovered.”

“Yes,” Lana nodded. “Preferably alive.” She turned back to Jhonnen. “Now go show the Revanites—and, fate willing, Revan himself—why you’re not to be trifled with.”

“Eat first,” Vette said, pressing a protein bar into his hands. “We can wait ten minutes.”

Jhonnen chose to eat outside of the hut, sitting on a crate and watching the village move. Vette settled on the ground at his side and rested her head against his leg. He could feel her chewing.

His chest felt swollen, full to bursting with affection.

“Hey, Vette?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“What for?”

He shrugged. “Traveling the stars with me? Not… I know you’ve got other options, I’m just lucky to be the one you picked.”

She sighed and nudged his leg. “You’re more fun than everyone else, Jhonny. You know that.”

He grinned and finished his protein bar, standing up and offered Vette his hands to pull her upright. She grinned back at him.

And for a moment they weren’t up against a shadowy cult.

Theron wasn’t in danger.

Marr’s fleet wasn’t flying into conflict with the Republic.

Vette was grinning at him. And he was grinning back.

They dropped hands and headed out for the valley, reality reasserting itself. Theron needed rescue and Revan needed to be stopped and they still didn’t know what Revan was after in the first place.

Things were bad.

They came up on the Revanite’s private airfield and Vette scoffed. “Apparently we could have just landed here. Everyone else did. They wouldn’t notice one more, right?”

Jhonnen snorted. “And then he’d just have Quinn systematically murdering his way through the Revanites the minute someone got too close to his suspension.”

“See,” Vette said. “Would have solved all our problems.”

They snuck in closer and Vette touched his elbow to get his attention.

He wished she could just reach in and touch his thoughts.
“Yeah?” he asked.

“Bet we could overload those generators, really ruin their day.”

He grinned. “You’re wicked.”

They changed trajectory and Jhonnen stuck his lightsaber through it and broken something vital. Then they crept back to the ships and set to sticking Jhonnen’s lightsaber through access panels here and there.

With the ships defunct, Jhonnen and Vette found a communications terminal and Vette sliced a foothold for Lana, who appeared over the holo.

“I’m starting to get the hang of slicing,” Lana said. “Theron’s influence, I suppose. Give me one second.”

While they waited, it dawned on Jhonnen that Theron had taught Lana to slice. They had had downtime while they were on the run. They had bonded. They might have been friends.

And she let the Revanites take him.

What would that do to Theron as a person, that kind of betrayal?

“There,” Lana said. “A holorecord of Theron under interrogation. Coordinates are coming your way.”

“Is Revan with him?”

Lana shrugged. “No indication he’s there, but no indication he isn’t, either. I wouldn’t let my guard down.”

The channel died and Jhonnen exchanged glances with Vette.

She shrugged. “Let’s go save your boyfriend.”

Jhonnen sputtered. “He’s not my—I don’t even—it wouldn’t work anyhow.”

Vette started walking towards the stronghold, forcing Jhonnen to jog to keep up.

In the stronghold, Jhonnen launched himself forward to draw the Revanite’s fire, making a nuisance of himself while Vette harassed the enemy from the front and when everyone was dead they charged deeper in, looking for an interrogation room.

They entered a room with a holotable and it clicked to life as Jhonnen drew close, revealing Revan on the other side of the line.

“Hiya,” Jhonnen said darkly.

“I should have known the Empire would send one of its lapdogs to try and find me. You should never have bothered.”

“Uh-huh, that’s great. Where’s Theron?”

“Theron Shan’s fate doesn’t matter. Neither does yours. I’m changing the fate of the galaxy itself.”

“Uh-huh,” Jhonnen said.
“I’m not waging some war with the Empire and Republic,” said Revan. “I’m saving countless lives, and you keep getting in the way.”

“I’m good at that.”

“The only upside in your being here, really, is that you get to bear witness. My plan’s too far along for you to stop it now.”

Jhonnen attention was diverted by the sound of blaster fire and an explosion in the other room. He dropped into his stance and then straightened as Theron came rocketing through, slamming the open door closed behind him.

“Don’t listen to him,” Theron shouted. “It’s not over yet.”

“Thank the stars you’re in one piece,” Jhonnen said, deflating a little with relief.

“Also armed,” Vette added. “Armed is good.”

“Figured I had a lot to tell, you,” Theron said. “So I broke out. Guess I could’ve saved myself the trouble. Don’t know how much Lana or Revan told you, but he’s lured the Republic and Imperial command fleets to Rishi.”

“Yeah, he’s trying to take out the leaders on both sides, why is something I still don’t know.”

“It’ll barely be a fight,” Theron explained. “Revanites embedded on both sides are going to sabotage shields, weapons—you name it—and we can’t warn them. Revan had the Nova Blades build him a signal jammer. No communications at all up in Rishi space. It’ll be a bloodbath.”

“This actually makes a couple of other things make sense, but the solution seems a little obvious,” Jhonnen said, less worried about Quinn but now worried about several other things. “We get Jakarro to shoot the jammer. He’s been blowing up all sorts of things.”

“The Revanites have that thing protected. You send Jakarro out and he and Deefour become part of the landscape.”

The building rumbled.

Theron looked up worriedly. “This place is coming down. Soon!”

“You could have joined me, Theron,” Revan said, looking somehow disappointed despite the mask. “Understandably, you’re as tenacious as I ever was. Goodbye.”

Vette fired into the security droids as they exploded into the room. “Why does it sound like he knows you?” she asked.

“He’s my grandfather,” Theron answered, rushing off towards the exit. “Couple of greats.”

Jhonnen was stunned almost to stopping, but pushed himself forward to protect Theron as he started slicing into a console to stop the self-destruct sequence.

The console exploded.

Jhonnen grabbed Vette’s hand and curled his thoughts protectively around hers.

The rumbling stopped. “Hello? Are you there?”
Jhonnen blinked as Lana’s voice came through the intercom. “Lana?” he let go of Vette’s hand and slowly withdrew his thoughts. “What the fuck?”

“I appear to have sliced through four layers of encryption to remotely deactivate the power core.”

“Just in the nick of time,” Theron said. “Don’t know if I could’ve managed that, even.”

Jhonnen smiled. “If the console hadn’t exploded, I think you would have managed.”

“Theron,” Lana let the name hang in the air. “Good to know you’re alive. I heard everything—about the jammer, all of it. We need to regroup for an immediate attack. Whatever happens…” she trailed off for a moment. “Be proud of what we’ve accomplished. See you soon.”

Jhonnen, Vette and Theron were quiet until they were hidden by jungle. Then, Jhonnen’s burning curiosity got the better of him.

“So… grandfather?”

Theron gave him a surprised look. “You didn’t piece it together from the name?”

Jhonnen shook his head.

“So you have no idea who my mother is?”

Jhonnen shook his head again.

Theron’s expression gentled. “That’s… kind of a relief, if I’m honest.” He took a breath. “Grandmaster Satele Shan is my mother.”

Jhonnen blinked at him. “But… she’s a jedi. I thought they didn’t…”

Theron shrugged. “We’re not close. The Order’s got rules about attachments.”

Jhonnen smiled at him. “She’s missing out.”

Vette laughed, shaking her head and walking a little faster so she outpaced them. Jhonnen watched her go with surprise and reached out with his thoughts to touch hers, checking for offense.

He found… sadness and resignation.

Jhonnen withdrew.

<< It is good to have you back! >> Jakarro slapped Theron on the back as they returned to the hut.

“Alright,” Theron coughed. “Take it easy. I’m not exactly a hundred percent and you’re not exactly gentle.”

“Oh good!” said Deefour. “The team’s back together again—all thanks to you for saving Theron, of course.”

Jhonnen nodded absently, watching Vette as she moved to the sleeping mats and settled down. He looked back at Deefour, “I pretty much just watched Theron rescue himself. It was very exciting.”

<< Modesty! I might be sick… >>

Lana interrupted. “Theron, you have the intelligence on this signal jammer. You start.”
Theron glared at her. “Right. The intelligence I gathered in the company of several interrogation probes while being held against my will.” He let the comment hang in the air, and then started giving Jhonnen the intel. “Jammer’s on a nearby island. You’ve probably seen it. Can’t be sliced remotely, lots of Revanite zealots protecting it… the usual hopeless nightmare, basically.”

“So Vette and I hit it from the ground.”


Jhonnen looked to Vette and she sighed and picked herself up and followed him out of the hut.

“Are you alright?” Jhonnen asked as they made their way to charter a flight to the other island.

“Mm?” Vette shrugged. “Yeah. Just missed Taunt and the gang for a minute, don’t worry about me.”

Jhonnen nodded, he couldn’t blame her for missing Taunt and the guys. It was a very different kind of danger that she’d be being thrust into. A more voluntary danger. A nobler danger.

Not that there was something ignoble about facing down a shadowy cult trying to do… whatever it was Revan was trying to do, but it wasn’t quite as noble as rescuing artifacts and people and saving twi’lek heritage.

They took a long-range speeder, Vette curling her arms around his waist to hang on. Her cheek rested against Jhonnen’s shoulder blade so she clearly wasn’t mad at him.

That was something. That was enough.

They parked the speeder and took stock of the coordinates so they could find it again.

“I can see the signal jammer,” Jhonnen said into his comm.

“Perfect,” Theron said. “And I just hit the jackpot—an exhaustive list of Revanite traitors on both fleets. I’ll do what I can guide you through, but that signal jammer might cause some hiccups.”

Jhonnen nodded and relayed the message to Vette, who gave him a thumbs up before unholstering her blasters.

They started making their way through the Revanites, heading for the signal jammer nearer the middle of the island.

The hard part about dealing the the Revanites was that Revan had called combatants from all walks of life so at any stage Jhonnen and Vette might face Sith or Jedi or Troopers or Mandalorians. All very different styles, possibly coming at them all at once.

“Brutal,” Vette said, shaking her lekku. “Better make sure I have all my parts.”

“You look intact to me,” Jhonnen said. “Which is good. I react… poorly… to you getting injured.”

“Yeah,” Vette smiled at him. “I’m a little bummed I didn’t get to watch you light into Arkous.”

“It was over quickly,” Jhonnen said. “I was more concerned with getting you medical care than I was with hurting him. But, yeah, I did want to hurt him.”

“You say the sweetest things.”
They took a lift up into the Revanite’s main encampment and the air shook with thunder before opening up with rain. Drops sizzled as they hit Jhonnen’s lightsabers.

“Okay, you’re in,” said Theron in Jhonnen’s ear. “There’s a forcefield between you and that jammer. You’ll have to gather a set of security codes to pass through. Signals going to start breaking up soon. Talk to you when you get that jammer shut down.”

Jhonnen passed the information along to Vette.

“Sooner the better,” Vette said. “I’m getting drenched.”

“Better than Dromund Kaas at least,” Jhonnen said. “This storm will probably let up within the week.”

Vette snorted. “Most planets are better than Dromund Kaas. It’s basically where freedom goes to die.”

“Where would you rather live?” Jhonnen asked, starting to walk into the main encampment.

“Like, a planet?”

He nodded.

Vette shrugged. “Never really given it any thought. I’ll get back to you on it.”

Vette sliced into the Revanites’ consoles to find the access codes they needed, Jhonnen stood with his back to her, watching the door in case anyone tried to interfere. They repeated the process once more to get the other half of the code and then Jhonnen carved them a path forward.

Once they’d found the forcefield, they went looking for the console controlling it and found it in short order. Vette input the access codes and Jhonnen stood guard and then they hurried forward.

They were stopped by a pair of Revanites, one Jedi and one Sith, and Jhonnen slid into his stance. He had to keep their attention off of Vette. He launched forwards, diving towards the Sith and blocking her dualsaber with one blade. When the Jedi swooped in behind him, Jhonnen kicked him in the chest. He twisted, narrowly dodging a blow and guiding it into the other.

They can’t have been fighting together long, he thought, maybe I can use that against them. He spun around so he was behind the sith, using her as a shield for a moment, keeping behind her and then suddenly throwing her forward so the Jedi had to take his lightsaber offline.

Vette lined up a shot and fired. Jhonnen dove in to tangle up their blades and shoved his lightsaber through the sith’s chest as Vette’s blaster bolt went through the Jedi’s temples.

“You okay?” Vette asked.

Jhonnen took stock of a couple of burns. “I’m fine. I’ll ice them when we’re back at the hut.”

“You know, living here wouldn’t suck,” Vette volunteered. “The Rishii seem content to leave people alone, it’s not like we’d be living at Raider’s Cove.”

Jhonnen, privately touched that she said we’d be living and not I’d be living, nodded his head. “I can’t see Quinn being happy about such a move.”

Vette laughed. “That’s what I like best about it. Where do you want to live?”
Jhonnen considered. “Here would be nice, the climate seems varied enough that it wouldn’t get samey without ever getting cold. Part of me has always wanted to move back to Nar Shaddaa.”

Vette smiled at him. “I would move to Nar Shaddaa with you, but only with you.”

It was probably a moot point. He needed to live in the heart of the Empire to keep the Dark Councillors from growing suspicious. But now he could daydream about living in peace somewhere else with Vette.

And he intended to use that because any escapism was good escapism.

They found an AA cannon and looked up to see a space battle thundering over head. Republic ships and Imperial ships and ships that probably belonged the the Revanites. He looked back at the cannon. “Hey, Vette?”

“Yeah?”

“Think you could change the targeting parameters on this gun?”

Vette walked over and took a look. “Yeah, probably. What do you want it firing on?”

“See the smaller ships griefing the big ones?” Jhonnen said, pointing. “Shoot those down.”

“Roger that.” Vette tapped out a few lines of code and then manually changed the targeting before stepping back and looking pleased with herself.

Hurrying along the way, they found a colossal structure, like a ship had been buried nose-deep in the island. The pathway was littered with Revanites. Jhonnen and Vette fought their way inside, figuring punching through the ship would be the fastest way to the jammer.

It was, but they arrived just in time to see a massive walker drop in their path. Jhonnen looked around and spotted cover. “Get to cover,” he pointed, both hands holding his lightsabers. “I’ll draw it’s fire while you exploit any extra holes I put in it.”

“Right.”

“Now!” Jhonnen leapt at the walker while Vette rushed for cover. He sliced at the walker’s ankles, unsurprised to find that the legs were coated in cortosis, a necessary expenditure if you didn’t want every idiot with a lightsaber able to topple it. He had to dodge, rather than deflect, the massive bolts the walker fired. He leapt back and threw his right lightsaber, scoring a deep cut in the side of the walker for Vette to exploit. Once he had his lightsaber again he dodged the missile batter the walker fired at him.

And repeated this, scoring another deep hit.

The walker began to spark and then it seized It toppled forward, Jhonnen dodged out of the way. A woman pulled herself from the wreckage and then fell forward, dead.

Vette holstered her blaster. “You alright?”

Jhonnen nodded and then jogged over to the signal jammer to deactivate it.

“Nice,” Theron said. “I’m in.”

Jhonnen called Darth Marr’s flagship. “Darth Marr, come in.”
“I am here,” said Darth Marr, flickering into place on the holo. “And you are on Rishi.”

Jhonnen nodded. “There’re traitors, scores of them, in your fleet. They’re acting on orders from Revan.”

“Revan is alive?”

Jhonnen nodded again. “He’s lured your fleet here to destroy the command of both the Republic and the Empire at once. I’ve disabled a jammer that was blocking all signal in Rishi space, which should explain any technical difficulties you’ve been having.”

“Have the fleet power down all weapons,” Marr ordered someone. “Do it now.”

“Your people should have just received a list with the names of the traitors.”


“Grandmaster Shan,” Marr inclined his head to his worth adversary. “It appears we have been set upon each other by you ancestor.”

“Yes,” the Grandmaster nodded. “We were notified by an agent of ours who’s planetside. We’re taking measures to detain the traitors among us.”

“As are we.” Marr said.

Jhonnen wonder how many of the revanites would get to be ‘detained’ and how many were going to get a short cold walk into space.

“Given the nature of the threat,” Marr continued. “I suggest we speak in person.”

Grandmaster Shan considered and then nodded. “Very well, a neutral location.”

“I have a safehouse in Raider’s Cove,” Jhonnen said. “We’ll send you the coordinates.”

“That will do,” Marr said.

Grandmaster Shan nodded her agreement.

“See you both shortly then.” Jhonnen ended the call and smiled a little when the tips of Vette’s fingers touched the inside of his wrist. “I’ll make sure Quinn’s on the way to pick us up. Less time I spend around Marr, the better.”

“I agree with that,” Jhonnen said. “If you want to make yourself scarce, swing by the Blaster’s Path when we get back to Raider’s Cove and I’ll meet you there when I’m done with Marr and the Grandmaster.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

When they landed in Raider’s Cove the rain was starting to let up. Jhonnen headed for the safehouse while Vette headed for the Blaster’s Path cantina to contact Quinn and generally stay out of the way of the Republic and Imperial bigwigs.

“...Then we are agreed,” Jhonnen heard Marr say as he entered the safehouse. “A truce for the time being.”
“That’s big,” Jhonnen said. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Satele Shan,” Grandmaster Shan touched her chest in introduction. “Grand Master of the Jedi Order. Your intervention allowed us to defend ourselves against the Revanite fleet. Many thousands owe their lives to your actions.”

Jhonnen gave her a small smile.

“And the all-encompassing rot of the Order of Revan has been excised from our fleets,” added Marr. “Now we turn to the matter of Revan himself.”

“My agent here,” the Grandmaster gestured to Theron, which seemed a little harsh because he was her son, “Has discovered that Revan’s on the fourth moon of Yavin, where he believes the last spark of the Sith Emperor resides.”

“Revan intends to return the Emperor from the brink of death so he may finally be destroyed.”

Jhonnen frowned, and remembered that Marr had spoken out against the Emperor before. He took a leap of faith. “You’ve said yourself that the Emperor doesn’t benefit the Empire. I don’t see the problem with destroying him.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, Wrath,” said Marr. “The Emperor hungers. If restored, he would attempt to consume all life in the galaxy, and I am certain he would succeed. No one—not Revan, not the Jedi, not you, not me—would be able to stop him.”

“Darth Marr and I will be leading a joint strike force on Yavin Four to put an end to Revan’s plan. I hope you’ll join us,” said the Grandmaster.

“As do I,” echoed Marr. “For the Empire. And for the galaxy.”

Marr and the Grandmaster left with their entourages and everyone else sat down at the small table where previously they’d taken their meals.

“That went surprisingly well, I think,” said Deefour.

Theron nodded and then wrinkled his nose at Lana. “Yeah. It’s nice to see the Empire and Republic can work together without stabbing each other in the back.”

Lana scoffed. “It was the right move, arranging for your capture. We’ve succeeded, haven’t we.”

Theron threw his hands up. “Unbelievable. Where’s the trust? Huh? Did it go wander off someplace, or was it never there to start with?”

“Theron’s right,” Jhonnen said. “It should have been a plan you came up with together if it was going to happen at all.”

“At the risk of sounding egotistical, I will not apologize for being right.”

“That’s not what you’d be apologizing for. You’re apologizing because right or not you betrayed a member of our team and got him tortured.”

Lana looked down at the table. She took a breath. “Theron… I recognize that I betrayed your trust, and for that I am sorry.”

<< I say enough of this, >> roared Jakarro. << We need to focus on the Revanites. >>
“Isn’t there… anything else you wanted first?” Theron asked.

Jhonnen nodded. “Yes I… need to talk to you alone.”

Lana and Jakarro left.

Jhonnen tried to smile at Theron and he couldn’t. Instead he took a deep breath.

“Where’s Vette?” Theron asked.

“At the cantina, I’m supposed to meet her there in a minute, we… generally keep her away from the Dark Council.”

Theron nodded.

“Look, Theron, I… like you. I think, given enough time, I could like you a lot. But we’re on opposite sides of a really stupid war and I’m afraid of your mom and even if none of those were the case, I’m madly, stupidly, in love with someone else and while I don’t see anything changing, it feels… dishonest… not to tell you about it.”

Theron chuckled a little. “You know, when you’re pretending you like being a sith lord, you seem about half a decade older.”

“I’ll take that as a good thing.”

Theron nodded. “It is. You should tell Vette how you feel though. If I’m getting shot down I’d like to at least think something good is coming out of it.”

Jhonnen turned purple. “I… what makes you think it’s Vette?”

“The way you look at her mostly,” Theron answered. “You gravitate to her when you’re both standing still. It’s cute.”

Jhonnen looked at his boots. “What makes you think I should tell her?”

“Well, mostly the fact that she looked jealous everytime I hit on you, but also she slept half on top of you one night and that’s usually a pretty good indicator that she’s into you.”

Jhonnen leaned back against the table and Theron leaned next to him.

“It’s just… its not as simple as maybe she likes me maybe she doesn’t,” Jhonnen said, remembering the conversation he’d had with Jaesa on Hoth. “Anyone—well anyone in the Empire—who sees us will just assume she’s my slave. That the only reason she’d be with me is if I was forcing her. I want people to see us as equals.”

“That’d be less of a problem in the Republic,” Theron offered, “Just a suggestion.”

“Wish I could, but the other person who flies with me is a diehard Imperial and if I leave Marr or someone else on the Dark Council will take it out on him.”

Theron nodded. “I’ll give you my comm frequency, if you and Vette decide to switch sides, I’ll help.”

“Thank you, Theron.” Jhonnen smiled. “And thank you for being understanding about… uh… us, I guess.”
“I should go catch up with Jakarro. See you on Yavin Four?”

Jhonnen nodded.

“This seat taken?” Jhonnen said, gesturing to the other half of the booth where Vette was tucked up. She looked up and smiled at him, shaking her head.

Jhonnen sat down. “Quinn on his way?”

Vette nodded. “You took longer than I thought you would. Theron need something?”

“We talked, is all,” Jhonnen said. “He offered some new… I don’t know… perspective on a couple of things and gave me his personal comm frequency in case we decide to leave the Empire someday.”

“In case we decide to leave?” Vette asked.

“He guessed I wouldn’t leave without you,” Jhonnen said with a shrug. “And he’s right.”

“Aw, I love you too,” Vette scrunched her nose affectionately as she said it.

Jhonnen grinned.
Jhonnen lay on his bed the night after they left Rishi, thinking about what Theron had said. He realized that he wasn’t in a good place to judge what was or wasn’t normal in a platonic relationship because the last time he’d had a friend he’d been thirteen. Kira would crash in his bed in the apartment living room and no one had thought anything of it. He and Kira had been inseparable.

And even if it wasn’t normal for platonic relationships on the whole, sleeping in the same bed and being inseparable was normal for Jhonnen and Vette. And their relationship was platonic.

So maybe Theron was wrong.

And even if Theron was right, there was still this issue of how the relationship would be perceived. Jhonnen didn’t want people to look at him and Vette and see master and slave. He didn’t want people to assume that she was with him against her will. He just wanted people to see Vette as her own person, free to make and making her own decisions.

But despite all of that, despite his misgivings and his doubts, the idea that maybe she loved him in return was exciting. It wasn’t like with Kira, where he had known through the Force bond and the knowing had hurt because it could never be fulfilled. With Vette there was an excitement. He knew already that Vette would face the galaxy at his side.

But maybe they could do that and share kisses. Maybe that would be nice.

Of course, he’d have to talk to her first and that was… daunting.

Jhonnen rolled to his side and felt ridiculous. He was one of the thirteen most powerful Sith in the galaxy and the idea of talking to his best friend was daunting. But it was because no matter what happened he was inviting change. And change had rarely been good to him.

He slept, at length, and in the morning rose and left his room. Quinn was already awake, as was usual, and the caf in the galley was hot. Jhonnen headed into the cockpit and leaned against one of the consoles, cupping his drink in his hands.

“My lord,” Quinn inclined his head politely.

“Mmm,” Jhonnen said noncommittally. “Vette awake?”

“I don’t believe so, my lord.”

Jhonnen nodded a couple of times and then took a long drink for his caf.

“Everything alright, my lord? You seem… distant.”

“Things are fine,” Jhonnen said, his voice squeaking at the end and making the whole sentence
unconvincing.

Quinn cocked an eyebrow and then said, in a very patient voice, “What’s happened?”

Jhonnen looked to the cockpit door like he was expecting to see Vette standing there, and then looked back at Quinn.

“I’ve just been… wondering if I should tell Vette…” He looked surreptitiously back at the door. Still no Vette. “How I feel.”

“Oh,” said Quinn, turning back to the helm. “Yes.”

“You mean yes that make sense or yes I should… do that?”

“The later, my lord,” Quinn said. “Ending the mutual pining between you and Vette would clear the atmosphere on the ship in a profound way. It may also turn the engine room back into an engine room which would allow me to make adjustments while Vette is sleeping.”

Jhonnen flushed purple. “What makes you think Vette has any interest… uh, in, uh, in me.”

“She sleeps in your bed approximately once a week, more if things are stressful. She is persistently by your side, and while I understand that you are paying her to ‘watch your back’ I do not believe the money is the motivator.”

“But… even if that’s true, there’s still the matter of what people would see. People assume she’s my slave all the time. I don’t want them assuming that while we’re… whatever we might become.” It felt stupid to use the word ‘together’. They were already together. They’d been together for years. They just might also be romantically involved.

If… he worked up the courage to talk to her about it and she was interested.

Quinn turned away from the helm to look at him. “My lord, you are powerful enough that no one would dream of trying to defend themselves if you corrected them. Moreover, I don’t believe you should put that much stock into what others think, you’re more than capable of defending what is yours.”

“I don’t want to put a target on her back.”

“The target is already there, my lord. Your affection for one another is unmistakable.” He sighed when Jhonnen dropped his gaze. “It’s a good thing, my lord. It makes you both stronger. You need something to fight for.”

Jhonnen offered a miserable smile. “Thanks, Quinn.”

“You two are cozy,” said Vette from the doorway. She was holding her own cup of caf. “I miss something interesting?”

Jhonnen turned an unconvincing shade of purple and Vette cocked an eyebrow. Jhonnen turned to Quinn. “We’ll… thank you, Quinn. We’ll talk later.”

He left the cockpit, Vette on his heels until he settled into one of the lounge sofas and she took up residence beside him. “You’re being weird,” she said, putting her legs in his lap. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” Jhonnen said. “Oh, it’s nothing, just got something on my mind.”

“Care to share?” Vette gave him a smile and he returned it.
"Give me a couple of days," he told her. "Then yeah, I’ll talk to you about it. I just need to get my head on straight."

Vette mussed his hair where it was hanging loose from its ponytail in the early morning. "Alright, Jhonny, just let me know."

The space around Yavin IV was crowded with Imperial and Republic ships but *The Sanguine Tide* was small enough that they took it straight down to the planet. They parked in a cleared strip of jungle. Yavin IV was colder than Rishi had been and therefore less steamy. They geared up and then all three of them left the ship together.

Yavin IV felt wrong. Like the darkside bubbled up through the cracked stone in the ruin the coalition had taken up residence in. It would be a miracle if the coalition survived tearing itself apart with this level of negative energy sparking all around them.

But there was a warm feeling, Kira, and that was something else to focus on.

"Quinn," Jhonnen said. "After we’ve met with Marr I want you to make yourself available to Imperial command. You’re to keep me apprised of the situation here and do whatever you think necessary to keep this alliance. Until we’ve dealt with Revan and the Emperor, we need the Republic."

"Yes, my lord."

"Vette?"

"Sticking with you," Vette answered.

Jhonnen smiled a little. "Thank you."

The Republic and Empire had set up in opposite parts of the ruin, with Marr and Grandmaster Shan’s command center in the middle and at the back. Jhonnen, Vette and Quinn made their way there immediately.

Jhonnen and Vette entered the command center and Jhonnen smiled at Kira and Katsulas where they were standing alongside Grandmaster Shan.

Kira spared him the smallest smile back. Katsulas, on the other hand, inclined his head politely.

"There can be no mistaking it," Marr said. "The Emperor is on this moon. Revan is here as well. And another presence, if you wish to believe the Grandmaster."

Jhonnen looked at Grandmaster Shan for clarification.

"The other presence," she said. "It’s… unclear. The dark side permeates everything here. Saturates it. I’ve been to Oricon; this is another level entirely."

Jhonnen nodded. "But it’s just amplified dark side energy, not like Oricon where it was manifesting fer effects. If everyone keeps an eye on themselves it should be fine."

"That’s a tall order," Katsulas said. "A lot of the rank and file have no idea how to watch themselves for dark side corruption."

"So we’ve got to keep an eye on everyone," Jhonnen sighed. "Great."
“The Order of Revan is garrisoned inside an old Massassi temple,” Marr said. “That is where the dark side is most prevalent.”

Lana took over. “We carved out an area as close to the temple as we could. The high concentrations of Massassi in these parts made it difficult.”

Theron sneered. “It didn’t help that you knew about the Massassi but didn’t bother to give a heads-up to our recon teams.”

“We need each other, and we need to act like it,” Jhonnen said, folding his arms over his chest. “Now, what the fuck is a Massassi?”

“They’re your genetic cousins,” Lana said. “Barbaric warriors from Korriban. I… thought you would know.”

Jhonnen shook his head, wondering how barbarians got from Korriban to Yavin IV. There was… a lot of space in the way.

“Don’t you teach your people anything, Lana?” Theron needled.

“Agent,” snapped the Grandmaster. “Compose yourself.” She turned to look at Jhonnen. “While Darth Marr and I have reached an accord many of those under our command obviously don’t share our sense of commitment.”

Marr nodded his agreement. “If you and Master Katsulas were to assist in shoring up our position, it would serve as an example to the rest.”

“We can be pragmatic, if we choose to,” Lana said. “Do what you do so well out there; I’ll remain in touch.”

“I’m leaving Captain Quinn here,” Jhonnen said. “He’ll assist as needed and focus on keeping the peace with the Republic.”

Quinn saluted.

“Very well, Wrath,” said Darth Marr.

Quinn looked over things and then turned to Jhonnen. “My lord, I believe you would best be served by setting up the perimeter sensors so we have an early warning in case of an attack.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Alright, Quinn. We’ll do that.”

The humidity was suffocating out in the jungle. Katsulas and Kira took half of the sensors while Jhonnen and Vette took the other half. Jhonnen, now that they were away from Marr and Grandmaster Shan, felt Kira in his thoughts, comforting and familiar.

“I feel like if we take one wrong step, this truce’ll break,” Vette said as Jhonnen stooped to set up one of the sensors. “I also feel like this planet—moon, whatever—is going to eat me. Can we go yet?”

“Soon, I hope,” Jhonnen told her. He took a risk and curled his hand around hers for the briefest squeeze. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“I know.” She shuddered. “My lekku are already dripping from the humidity and I swear I smell something rotting. Dromund Kaas is scary, but there’s something really wrong here.”
She was right, Jhonnen could feel the tendrils of the dark side trying to worm their way into his brain, whispering that he’d be stronger here. Strength to protect Vette and Quinn. To make sure that no one hurt or separated them again.

And it was tempting.

Vette curled a hand over his shoulder as he stood up and he exhaled. He had all the strength he needed, and he didn’t need Kira or Katsulas sensing his struggle.

They moved to get the rest of the sensors put up, fighting through jungle creatures and the occasional Massassi. The Massassi were huge and crimson, Jhonnen could see the resemblance between them and the pureblood sith, but it wasn’t a flattering mirror.

“Lana here,” Lana said as Jhonnen set up the last sensor. “I have an opportunity for us, if you’re interested.”

“I’m listening.”

“There’s a redundant monitoring subsystem in the equipment you’re installing. You could activate the subsystem, setting it to track Republic chatter and movement.”

“I think we’ve betrayed enough trust for one campaign,” Jhonnen said, a little sharply. “Is there anything helpful we can do?”

Lana was quiet for a moment and then said. “We can set up the backup system to assist the primary. I’ll walk you through the steps.”

Welcome, a voice echoed through the Force. Jhonnen tried to hold on to it and it was about as successful as catching mist.

With the sensors activated, Jhonnen and Vette returned to the staging ground. She touched his shoulder to let him know she was headed off and Jhonnen nodded. He met up with Katsulas back at the staging area and smiled when Kira wiggled her fingers for his and and touched the pads of his fingers with the pads of her fingers for the briefest moment.

They headed over to report to Marr and Grandmaster Shan by himself. Quinn saluted from the console he was manning as Jhonnen walked up the stairs to the planning table.

Theron gave Jhonnen a thin smile. “We’ve got a much better picture now of what’s between us and the temple. First thing’s the Massassi. We knew we’d be facing a lot, but now we know it’s a lot-a lot.”

“There can be no reasoning or bargaining with the Massassi,” Lana said. “Once we encroach upon their territory, the will attack.”

“Neat,” Jhonnen said with a sigh. “And the next thing?”

Marr took over. “The best of the Imperial Guard are trained in special facilities—honed to physical perfection and instilled with unwavering loyalty. We found one such facility between us and the temple. The Emperor must have had it constructed in secret.”

“And there are life forms inside,” the Grandmaster said. “Human. Whether it’s Revanites or the Emperor’s guard, they won’t be looking to help us.”

“I can handle investigating the facility,” Jhonnen said.
"I’ll go with you," Katsulas said.

Marr shook his head. "There are secrets there that I do not wish the Republic to learn. But, that location is of great strategic value," Marr said, he turned to Jhonnen. "Make clear to its inhabitants, whomever they are, that the facility is ours now."

Jhonnen nodded. "First thing in the morning. I’m not foolhardy enough to brave that jungle in the dark."

He waited for Marr to contradict him and when he didn’t, turned his attention to Quinn. "When you’ve finished here for the day, I’ll be waiting upon my ship."

"Yes, my lord."

Once away from Marr and Grandmaster Shan, Jhonnen, Katsulas and Kira tucked into a corner. "How’ve you been?" he asked Kira, resisting the urge to crush her in his arms. "I haven’t seen you since Oricon."

"We’ve been alright," Kira rested her hands on her hips. "Nobly defending the Republic. You?"

Jhonnen gestured around. "I’ve been dealing the Revanites for a while."

Kira narrowed her eyes. "Were you responsible for the assault on Tython?"

Jhonnen winced. "Responsible? No. But was I the blunt instrument Darth Arkous chose to use? Unfortunately, I did what I could to limit the loss of life." He looked at Katsulas. "Were you tapped for the assault on Korriban?"

"Yes," Katsulas nodded. "Sorry."

Jhonnen shrugged. "It doesn’t bother me. I remember what the Academy was like. It was a miserable place." He stretched. "I should get back to my ship."

Katsulas and Kira nodded.

"See you in the morning," Katsulas said.

Jhonnen nodded and headed back towards the ship and found Vette hanging out on the landing equipment, munching on a piece of fruit she’d clearly gotten from on board. She joined him as he headed aboard and flopped over onto the couch. "It’s not as hot as Rishi and I’m still all sticky," she complained, face down on the cushion. "Where’s Quinn?"

"Finishing up," Jhonnen said. "Go use the fresher and then we can work out a plan for the training facility tomorrow."

"Training facility?"

"Yeah, we’ve either got Imperial Guard in our way or Revanites who have beaten the Imperial Guard. Either way it’ll be a fight."

"Kira and Katsulas joining us?"

"No, Marr doesn’t want the Republic anywhere near the facility."

Vette nodded and then headed off to use the refresher.
He made himself something to eat while Vette was in the refresher. Part of why he didn’t want to
deal with the training facility until tomorrow is he wanted time to extend protection over Quinn and
Vette. He could shield Vette while they were out in the field, but he needed to make sure Quinn
didn’t lose himself.

When Vette had finished using the refresher, Jhonnen took his turn. He dried off and dressed and
flopped over onto the sofa next to her.

“So,” Vette said. “You ready to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Jhonnen leaned his head on her shoulder. “I’m still trying to figure out how,” he admitted. “Please
bear with me.”

She smoothed her cheek over the top of his head. “Sure, Jhonnen, for as long as you need.”

“I’ll… I’ll talk to you about it by the time we leave Yavin,” he promised, setting a deadline for
himself because he acknowledged that if he didn’t set one, he was never going to do it.

And if he didn’t talk to her about it, they’d remain in this limbo because now she knew something
was up. He had to bite the blaster bolt and own up to his feelings.

Even though—and especially because—he was terrified of the possibility of change.

Jhonnen and Vette headed deeper into the jungle, sticking close together to try and avoid startling
any of Yavin IV’s cranky and dangerous wildlife. They found Revanites crawling all over the
training grounds and were forced to clear them out before heading inside.

“Darth Marr and I both sense a growing presence,” Lana said in Jhonnen’s ear. “We’re almost
certain it’s due to your activities.”

Jhonnen took a breath, all he felt through the Force was this miasma of whispering darkness, the
proof that what remained of the Emperor was on this moon.

He and Vette crept into the old temple that housed the Imperial training ground.

“They’re ruining everything!” a man raved and Jhonnen and Vette snuck through the decrepit old
building. “I see it. We see. But they don’t see. They don’t even have eyes!”

Jhonnen turned a corner and motioned for Vette to stay back. He saw three humanoids in red, the
speaker was a pale skinned bald human not wearing a helm.

“Wait here,” Jhonnen said to Vette out of the corner of his mouth.

“We are all that’s left,” ranted the guardsman. “We have to flush the others from this place. Only
then can we wake the starving Emperor and grant him sustenance.”

“Who are you?” Jhonnen said in as sithy a voice as he could manage.

The speaking guardsman whirled around. “Lord Wrath! It’s Lord Wrath! I am Commandant Iven.
We’re the true Imperial Guard. We’re here to serve the Emperor. We must cleanse the temple of
the Revanites. We have to prepare the Emperor’s feast.” He clicked a button and his electrostaff
buzzed to life. “And you don’t have to do anything, Wrath. Just let us sacrifice you in his name.
Food for the Emperor!”

Jhonnen dodged backwards and kicked Iven in the chest to force him backwards. Jhonnen drew his
lightsabers and parried the other two guards as they tried to surround him. He needed to take one of them alive, but that meant fighting at a disadvantage.

And fighting at a disadvantage against the Emperor’s Guard might actually kill him. He focused on fighting defensively, bobbing and weaving and then one of the guards slumped over dead.

“Come on,” Vette shouted defiantly. “Bring it!”

Jhonnen started to push back, he ducked low, deactivating his lightsaber as it came to meet the guard’s guard and reactivating it on the other side of the electrostaff, bisecting his opponent. He dropped his lightsaber and grabbed Iven’s electrostaff, jerking it forward and headbutting the Commandant in the nose, weakening his guard so Jhonnen could twist the weapon out of his grip.

“We’ve got company,” Vette said. “Imperial troopers.”

Jhonnen nodded and let the support team come and electrocuff Iven. He pulled out his comm and called Marr. “Well, they were Imperial Guard.”

“Yes,” Marr nodded. “The support team says their commandant’s a raving madman. We’ll want to question him. Insane or not, he’ll be of use to us.”

Jhonnen nodded.

*Closer,* that same sensation through the Force. Something bright through the miasma but it slipped away as he tried to grasp it.

He and Vette followed the troopers through the jungle and back to the staging area. He returned to the command station to catch the end of an argument between Marr and Grandmaster Shan about how the captured Commandant should be handled. Jhonnen folded his arms over his chest. Katsulas and Kira were missing, assigned to something else.

Speaking out against Marr was a risk. But, by the same token, he really didn’t answer to anyone.

“I agree with the Grandmaster,” he said. “Torture brings with it a greater risk of being lied to or further damaging his already tenuous grip on reality. We need him intact.”

“Given your *unique* perspective, I will defer to you, Wrath.” Marr did not sound happy about it.

But that was fine. Marr never sounded happy about anything.

Grandmaster Shan nodded. “Bring the man to my chambers.”

Everyone went their separate ways, and Vette and Jhonnen headed over to where Quinn was manning a console.

“What’s been happening?” Jhonnen asked.

“Nothing good, my lord,” Quinn presented him with a fairly delicate frown. “Both sides have attempted to employ underhanded tactics that are doing nothing to foster a sense of cooperation. The Imperials responsible have been punished, and we’ve received a show of solidarity from the Republic command. Still, tensions remain high.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Keep me in the loop.”

“Of course, my lord.”
Hours passed, Kira and Katsulas returned, and then Lana signaled Jhonnen and Vette to meet her, Theron and Jakarro in a corner where they were confident they weren’t going to be interrupted or overheard.

“So,” Jhonnen said. “What’s the word?”

“The word?” Theron asked. “Try unsettling.”

“How do you mean?” Katsulas asked.

“According to Iven,” said Lana. “There’s a device inside the temple they had hoped to use to bring the Emperor back. It’s a weapon designed to eradicate all living things on the moon, save for those safely inside the temple.”

“Oh,” Deefour’s eyes flashed. “I should like to see that! Just imagine!”


Lana continued. “The device appears to be Sith in origin. That’s how the Emperor knew about it; why he chose to retreat to Yavin Four.”

“The Imperial Guard was going to use it to restore the Emperor.

Lana nodded. “Yes. And now Revan plans to use it for the same purpose. If we can’t stop him, we’re all dead.”

<< This is about more than revenge now, >> warbled Jakarro. << This is survival. >>

“So let’s not waste any time,” Jhonnen suggested.

“Iven clued us in on a series of complex locks that will get us access to the temple,” Theron said. “They’re our next objective.”

“You’ll be wading into Massassi territory,” Lana added. “Be fearless.”

Jhonnen didn’t want to venture into the jungle as it was getting dark, but with the new information, they couldn’t afford to wait.

“I’ll come with you,” offered Katsulas.

“Me too,” Kira said.”

Jhonnen nodded.

Vette stuck close to him as the gloom made the shadows long and thick. They crept through Massassi territory as best they could, Jhonnen, Kira and Katsulas keeping their lightsabers unignited to keep from giving away their position. They activated the locking mechanisms, keeping low.

*Your arrival has been foreseen. You must press on.*

Jhonnen shook his head to dispel the voice as they headed into the cave to find the second locking mechanism. No one else seemed to notice.

Vette, who had experience with this sort of things attuned the runes and the voice came back.
Hurrying inside the Massassi temple, Jhonnen and Vette defeated the Massassi defenders and used the third locking mechanism, opening the path to the Temple where Revan was most likely waiting.

They took a moment to breathe and then.

*It’s time. You’ve finally arrived.*

Jhonnen and Vette turned and watched a spectral figure step out of the temple walls. He was human, with dark hair and a familiar voice.

“Revan?” Katsulas said skeptically. “But… if you were dead this would all be a *lot* less complicated.”

“The brooding monster inside those temple walls, he is not Revan. He is an abomination,” said ghost Revan, now speaking normally instead of just in Jhonnen’s head. “His obsessions, his arrogance, this angry crusade—it’s all blinded him to the truth. The many lives he’ll sacrifice to revive the Emperor will be nothing compared to what will follow.”

Which sounded… bad. But not surprising. They knew what would happen if Revan succeeded.

Or if… NotRevan succeeded. Apparently.

“It’s in your power to stop the abomination. But you won’t be able to do it alone,” said GhostRevan. “May the Force be with you.”

Jhonnen looked at Vette. “You saw him too, right?”

Vette nodded. “Yeah, My first ghost.”

“So if Revan’s dead… who’s commanding the Revanites?” Kira asked.

Vette shrugged. “We should probably tell Marr in any case.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen agreed. He pulled his comm out of his pocket and called Marr.

“The Jedi and I, we both felt it,” said Marr. “A ripple in the Force. You had a visitor, a manifestation.”

“We’re pretty sure Revan is leading the Revanites,” Jhonnen said. “But the ghost we just met was Revan.”

“That remains to be seen. And for now, it’s irrelevant. All that matters is that we stop the Revanites.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“All told, the Revanites may be the fiercest adversaries we’ve ever faced, and this temporary alliance with the Republic is unstable at best. We must gather our forces. We must endure. The fate of not only the Empire but the galaxy itself depends on it.”

Jhonnen nodded again and tucked the comm back into a pocket when Marr hung up. He and Vette crept back to the taxi in the dark, holding hands to keep from losing one another in the dark.
Vette returned immediately to the ship, but Jhonnen made his way back to the conference table to fill everyone in on his strange vision.

Marr and Grandmaster Shan both nodded and seemed to take it under advisement, but they agreed that there were more pressing issues. If they were going to mount and assault on the Temple, they needed the Imperial and Republic troops working together without trying to backstab one another.

Jhonnen kept his mouth shut before a variety of witticisms could irritate the two commanders, and suggested that he could at least prove to the Republic that the Empire was serious about making this work.

Katsulas offered to do the same for the Empire.

Quinn got him a list of tasks the Republic needed done and Marr suggested he weaken the Revanites further by taking out what remained of their command structure and Jhonnen agreed before heading back to his ship with Vette. She followed him into his room and sat on the edge of the bed while he flopped over.

“You alright?”

Jhonnen nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We’ve got a whole damn coalition and somehow everything *still* feels like it’s riding on me.”

Vette laid down slowly, one arm under her head and the other set lightly on his chest. “It’s almost over. Tomorrow you’ll force both sides to get along and then we’ll deal with Revan, or NotRevan, I guess, and you’ll tell me what’s been bothering you.”

Jhonnen turned his head to look at her. “You probably think I’m being overly dramatic.”

Vette shrugged. “I’ll decide that when I know what’s bothering you. If it’s bad enough you decided to confide in Quinn and not me, I figure it’s probably pretty serious.”

He wanted to tell her that it wasn’t *bad*. But he couldn’t because what if it was? What if his admission chased her away for good. What if he lost her? Lost her over something that had been true for years. What if she thought that he was only as open with her as he was because he was romantically in love with her when that had nothing to do with anything? Nothing had to change if she didn’t want it too, but would she *believe* that?

Jhonnen swallowed and cleared his throat. “I should… we should get some sleep.”

Vette nodded and sat up to take her boots off, encouraging Jhonnen to do the same. He dropped his shirt over the edge of the bed and slid under the covers. Vette joined him and he waved a hand to kill the lights.
Here Begins A New Life

Chapter Summary

“In that book which is my memory,
On the first page of the chapter that is the day when I first met you,
Appear the words, ‘Here begins a new life’.” -Dante Alighieri, Vita Nuova

Jhonnen woke up and slipped from the blankets, leaving Vette asleep. He pulled on a clean shirt and headed to the kitchen to make caf, unsure of when Quinn had gotten in the night prior. It had happened a handful of times over the last five years that Jhonnen had made the caf instead of Quinn, usually because Jhonnen just hadn’t slept the night prior.

When the caf was steeping, Jhonnen settled on the floor of the lounge and meditated, focusing inward and then pushing outwards, feeling Quinn and Vette.

He felt distress and jumped to his feet, hurrying through the red-lit hall to the bedroom where Vette had twisted in the sheets, her expression furrowed and lekku frightened. Quinn was having problems too.

Nightmares.

Of course they were having nightmares, this moon was evil.

He hadn’t noticed the night prior because he’d been out.

Jhonnen reached out and curled his thoughts gently over Vette and Quinn’s, providing a buffer.

These are my people, Jhonnen thought at the moon. You can’t have them.

Vette’s expression smoothed out.

Jhonnen padded back to the galley and got himself a cup of caf. He smiled when Quinn emerged from the refresher, and held his cup up to indicate that there was caf. Quinn nodded and headed into the galley.

When he had his caf, Quinn settled on the sofa next to Jhonnen. “Are you prepared to eliminate the Revanite commanders?” Quinn asked.

Jhonnen nodded. “Just as soon as Vette’s awake.”

Quinn took a drink of his caf. “I’ll keep you apprised of the situation here at the staging area as best I can, my lord.”

“Thanks,” Jhonnen took a drink of his own caf. “I’ll try to wrap things up quickly.”

Jhonnen returned to the staging area when he and Vette had finished the errands for the Republic and decimating the Revanite command structure. Katsulas returned not long after and spared Jhonnen a small smile as they made their way to the command station.
“Where’s Kira?” Jhonnen asked.

“Delivering some relics to an Imperial. She’ll join up with us after the briefing.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“Finally,” Darth Marr spread his hands out in front of him. “There can be peace between us—and not a moment too soon.”

Jhonnen nodded again.

“As we speak,” Marr continued. “Our forces are working with the Republic to end the Revanite threat and take the temple.”

Grandmaster Shan nodded. “In spite of our differences—and the fact we’re at war—you two were able to inspire a sort of cooperation I never imagined possible. Credit where it’s due, you succeeded where Marr and I failed.”

“But we aren’t finished yet,” said Marr. “There is one element even our combined militaries will be unable to stop.”

Jhonnen frowned. “Revan himself.”

Marr nodded. “Given his failure, he’ll try to escape, to regroup. That cannot be allowed to happen.”

“So we go handle him. All of us,” Jhonnen said. “Revan might have been one of the most powerful Sith and/or Jedi in the galaxy a couple centuries ago, but we have the numbers and combined strength to deal with him.”

“I agree,” said Katsulas.

They headed to the shuttles that would take them to the temple and Jhonnen waited for everyone else to board before he did.

He took the seat next to Vette and across from Kira. Vette touched his knee with hers. Across from them sat Kira and Katsula. Kira’s arms rested behind her head, eyes closed as she conserved her strength for the fight ahead.

Jhonnen brushed his thoughts against hers, and she opened her eyes and gave him a small smile. There hadn’t been a chance to really catch up, and there wouldn’t be a chance to really catch up.

But being in her presence was nice while it lasted.

Nervous? She asked.

Yeah.

They landed at the temple in the rain and hurried to confront Revan, Jhonnen and Katsulas pulling ahead of the pack.

“It’s over,” said Katsulas as they cornered the Master Force user.

Revan pointed his purple lightsaber at Jhonnen. “You’ve been at my heels far too long. I knew the Rishi plan was a longshot, but I had to try. Had to make it legitimate. I needed to lure you in. You were suppose to stay busy on Rishi long enough for me to finish here. But no, you couldn’t do that, could you?”
“I’m very rarely described as accommodating,” Jhonnen said. “Particularly of wackjobs.”

“Wrath,” Revan said, almost pleading. “You need to back down. You’re too close to all this to see just how much is at stake. I spent three hundred years in lock step with the Emperor’s mind. I know what he’s become, what he wants.” He reached up and took his mask off, revealing the same face as the ghost. Which was weird but whatever. “The Emperor must be destroyed completely or he will return and consume every last living thing. There’s no cost too great. If I have to snuff out every life on this world by hand to draw the Emperor out, then so be it.”

“No,” Jhonnen said. “I won’t let you do it.”

“You’re so naive, Wrath. You don’t even begin to comprehend what I’ve become. I was a Dark Lord of the Sith. I was the Prodigal Knight. I was powerful—but I was also weak. Not any more.”

Jhonnen sighed, forced to let Revan monologue while he and Katsulas waited for Marr, Satele and the others to catch up. He hated letting people monologue.

He rolled his eyes as Marr dropped from a shuttle. “You are wrong, Revan! He has powerful allies.”

“Allies from all—”

Jhonnen felt a little bit bad about cutting Lana off but it would be all day with this otherwise. “Surrender.”

“No.”

There was a beat before combat began as everyone waited for someone to make the first move. Accommodatingly, Jhonnen launched himself forward, figuring that they didn’t have time to stand on ceremony. Revan blocked both of Jhonnen’s lightsabers with one of his and kicked him hard in the chest, shoving him backwards.

But now Jhonnen’s allies had been galvanized. Marr rushed in, beating against Revan’s guard with powerful blows. Lana and Theron harried from the sides while Vette focused her attention on applying stims and kolto. When one person had to fall back, anyone rose up to take their place, forcing Revan to fight defensively.

But also getting in one another’s way. It had been a long time since either Marr or the Grandmaster had fought alongside as many other people. There were mistakes and Revan exploited them, hurling combatants into one another. Most distressingly, he blocked with the Force alone, like there was a bubble none of their weapons could get through.

They wore at his defenses until Jhonnen managed to get in a solid kick and send Revan careening into the floor. Down but not out, Revan flung Jhonnen back with the Force, knocking hard into one of the temple pillars. Jhonnen’s head cracked against the stone and black shot through his vision, making him nauseous. He picked himself up and stabbed an adrenal stim into his arm before he rushed back in, piggy backing off of one of Darth Marr’s strikes to stab Revan through the shoulder and bear him to the ground.

Jhonnen kicked one of Revan’s lightsabers across the mosaic floor.

Revan pushed himself upright, clutching the hole in his shoulder. “In defeating me, you let the real enemy linger on. You… you doom the galaxy.”
“Yeah, resurrecting the Emperor didn’t sound like a great plan either,” Katsulas said blithely. “Sorry.”

“He’s right you know,” Revan’s voice echoed and Revan (the physical one) backed away.

“No. Not you.”

The ghostly Revan manifested in the middle of the courtyard. “You’ve been so blinded by your unchecked rage, your thirst for vengeance, that you could not see the truth. Now that your power has subsided, I may finally confront you. I only hope you will listen.”

“This is weird,” Vette said under her breath.

Jhonnen nodded his agreement. “Yeah, even for Force stuff.”

“What, exactly, is happening here?” asked Kira.

Revan, the ghostly one, turned his attention to her. “When I died, I had come to terms. I was ready to become one with the Force. But I soon realized was only what part of me wanted.”

“I cast you out,” shouted physical Revan. “It was the only way to go on—to remain and finish what we started! You were holding me back!”

“You think you’re stronger this way,” GhostRevan turned back to his physical counterpart. “But you’re not. Neither of us is. We’re broken. We can’t go on like this.”

“I won’t stop. Not until I conjure the Emperor. I have to face him.”

A cruel laugh started up around them. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of the storm. Jhonnen reached for Vette’s hand, pulling her closer to him where he could protect her.

“You wanted my return,” said a cold voice, the same voice Jhonnen had heard in the Dark Heart on Voss. “You did not need to destroy whole fleets or turn a living world barren for that. You only had to point the Empire and Republic to a shared adversary, and let them do what they do naturally: make war.” The temple began to glow purple as the dark side energy gathered around it like clouds above a tempest. “The scores of dead have nourished me. I am awakened. And I bring with me—death!” The purple light shot to this sky. “Do not fret, Wrath. You are still special to me. That is why I will kill you last.”

Jhonnen felt like he was going to throw up, and not just because of the blood slowly coursing down the back of his head. But gradually, the dark side mellowed, proof that the Emperor was gone.

“The Emperor was not as strong as he might have been had Revan succeeded,” said Grandmaster Shan. “But he was strong enough.”

Vette turned her hand in Jhonnen’s and gave it a squeeze.

“No!” physical Revan protested. “He was supposed to face me... To...”

“You’re weak,” said the ghost. “You won’t last.”

The man turned his face to his ghostly counterpart, free written on his features. “I... If we unite, what I am—won’t it fade? Become diminished?”

The ghost looked at Jhonnen. “Lord Wrath. You have endured betrayal upon betrayal. You find value in restraint, in virtue. Look at how well your way has served you.”
Jhonnen was *very* aware of Darth Marr.

“You make a fine example,” said GhostRevan.

Jhonnen would have preferred it if the spirit of a long dead Jedi and/or Sith *hadn’t* called him out in front of one of the members of the Dark Council, but there was nothing for it.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” said PhysicalRevan.

“You have to be,” said the ghost. “We have to.”

The two men were pulled towards one another. The body fell over dead, the ghost flexed his hands.

“So you’re… one guy?” Jhonnen ventured.

“It’s more than that.” Revan said. “For the first time in a long time, I’m… myself. Thank you, for all that you’ve done and all that you’ve shown me. Dark days lie ahead. The darkest days. If my error can’t be undone, everyone will pay the price.” He disappeared. “Brace for the worst.”

Everyone headed back for the shuttle, tired and worried, they returned to the command center in silence.

“You’re bleeding,” Vette said.

Kira looked up.

Jhonnen nodded. “He *did* chuck me into a pillar. I should probably be unconscious.”

“How are you *not* unconscious?” Vette asked, producing a kolto show and a medpac.

Jhonnen shrugged uselessly. “Adrenal stim?”

Vette sighed. She looked at Kira and smiled a little. Kira smiled back, rolling her eyes. Jhonnen huffed. Yes, he had always been like this, no, he didn’t need their *sass*.

He met Lana and Theron in a small corner while Vette went to get her burns patched up.

“So, I guess this is goodbye,” Theron said to Lana as Jhonnen walked up.

“I suppose so,” Lana gave him one of her mysterious smiles. “It’s been… an experience, Theron. Be well to yourself.”

“Yeah, Yeah, you too, Lana. Try not to get into too much trouble, all right?” He looked over at Jhonnen and smiled. “Looks like you’re finally getting rid of me. How’s it feel?”

“I have two, maybe three friends, Theron. This feels like losing the fourth,” Jhonnen said honestly. “I wish you luck.”

“Same here. Guess if we ever meet again, it won’t be friendly. Well, seems weird to wish you luck, though you just did.” Theron shook his head. “See you, Jhonnen. Don’t let the Emperor get you down.”

Theron left, leaving Lana and Jhonnen alone.

Lana looked up at him. “Darth Marr wishes to speak with me. Probably to remind me that we
failed to keep the Emperor at bay.” She inclined her head and wandered off.

Jhonnen leaned against the crumbling ruin wall until he felt Kira’s thoughts slide into his own. Marr and the Grandmaster were too distracted to pay attention to one Force bond.

He smiled when Kira arrived. They shared one brief hug and then stepped apart from one another in case someone walked by.

“I talked to Vette over by the medical droid.” Kira said, tapping the bandage on her cheek. “You sure you’re alright with what the Emperor said?”

“I was going to have to stop him anyway,” Jhonnen said. “This is all just a little more urgent.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get involved sooner. Kat talked to Agent Shan about it and apparently there were concerns that we were Revanites. Kat’s… not popular with the Jedi Council, actually.”

“It would have been nice working with you guys. And I feel like you would have liked Rishi,” Jhonnen said. “The whole place is the sort of lawless you could twist around your little finger.”

Kira smiled at that. “I should get back to Kat. We’ve got a war to win.”

Jhonnen nodded. “For what it’s worth, good luck.”

She smiled at him and left.

Jhonnen waited another minute and then returned to the command center, where Marr was talking to Lana. He wondered if it was going to be possible for him to sneak off, but one look at Marr told him to remain where he was. He walked over. “You wanted a word?”

“We suffered many casualties upon the Emperor’s return,” explained Marr. “Though nothing insurmountable. Nothing compared to what we would have endured had the Revanites been successful. You are to be commended, of course—but it was Lana Beniko’s guile and intellect that made your participation at all possible.”

Jhonnen nodded his agreement, grateful that this didn’t appear to be a “what did Revan mean” conversation.

“That is why I have placed Lana in charge of Sith Intelligence.”

“I can’t think of a better choice,” Jhonnen answered. “She’ll excel.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Lana.

“That will be all for now,” said Marr. Lana left and Marr turned his attention back to Jhonnen. “The Empire grows ever stronger. The mining of isotope-5 has bolstered our energy independence, and we’re free from concern over the threat of Revan and his followers.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Yes,” agreed Darth Marr. “Our momentary truce is over. We remain at war with an emboldened Republic and we still have countless enemies, both seen and unseen.” Marr paused a moment, like he was looking Jhonnen over. “I won’t pretend to know how the Emperor’s transformation as affected you. Enlighten me.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “He has to be stopped. We knew that, this just makes it more pressing.”
“Bold. Unflinching. Good.” Marr gestured for Jhonnen to walk with him, leaving the command center behind to be torn down. “You are of singular importance to our future. The Emperor may have abandoned you, but in my eyes you are ever the Empire’s Wrath. The Empire is whole once more. It grows and strengthens. Our obstacles are severe, but they are known to us. The galaxy is ours to grasp. Let us reach.”

Jhonnen nodded an agreement he didn’t feel and left for his ship. He waited in the lounge for Quinn and Vette. They boarded and Quinn headed immediately for the cockpit to take them off the jungle moon. Vette settled on the sofa beside Jhonnen. “You alright?”

He nodded. “Just tired.”

“We’re leaving Yavin IV,” she said, nudging him gently. “You said you’d tell me what’s wrong.”

Jhonnen turned purple. He was out of time. He exhaled. “Yeah… I did.” He rubbed the back of his neck and watched his feet. “Okay. So. This doesn’t…it doesn’t have to change anything.” He began to speak more quickly. ”I mean, it’s been a thing for years so I don’t expect things to change and it’s also not really important. I mean, you’re my best friend. Everything we have we have because I love you platonically. And I think you love me too. Uh, platonically.”

Vette set her hand on the back of his neck. “Slow down.”

He took a breath and bit the blaster bolt. “I’m in love with you. Not just romantically, but romantically too.”

Vette didn’t remove her hand from the back of his neck, but her other hand came up and cupped his cheek, she turned his face towards hers. “You’re serious.” Her lekku were wary but hopeful.

He nodded. “I’ve felt this way for years. You’re the most important thing—the best thing—that’s ever happened to me. But nothing has to change! I mean if you want or need them change I understand and I’m not gonna argue or whatever.”

Vette smiled, lekku shifting with delight. “You moron”—her grin brightened—“I love you too.”

He blinked at her, and then realization spread over his face and he grinned. He folded her into his arms and squeezed her tight.

He pulled away from her, holding her hands in his. His other reasons for hesitating caught up with him. "I'm worried about how people see us. You've never been my slave but that's all people will see. And they'll assume that you couldn’t… that you wouldn’t love me of your own volition."

"Of course I would,” she promised. “I do, I have.” Vette squeezed his hands. "As for the rest, correct them."

"That puts you in harm's way." 

She shrugged. "So does everything we do. The Emperor basically said he's gunning for you, I'm still here."

"You are…” Jhonnen said with no small amount of wonder.

"So, just so I'm clear on everything, you've been sitting on this for years until you decided to talk to Quinn about it?" 

Jhonnen laughed. "It's even dumber than that, actually. I let Theron down and he told me to tell
you. I ended up confiding in Quinn basically on accident."

"I was really hurt when I thought there was something you could tell Quinn and not me."

"Nope, it was just me being terrified and kinda stupid." He grinned at her. "Speaking of Quinn, I should go give him a heading."

"Wait," Vette leaned in to kiss him and Jhonnen put his hands on her shoulders to stop her.

"I really do want to kiss you," he told her. "Like, a lot, actually. I don’t think I realized how much until it was suddenly an option. But I want to take my jewelry off for the first time."

Vette looked confused. “Why?”

He smiled at her. “Because I want to kiss you first as myself, without the sithy-ness.”

Vette laughed and nodded. He grinned and headed into the cockpit, leaning against the wall and beaming.

“I take it the conversation went well, my lord,” said Quinn.

“Yes it… thank you. I probably wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t talked to you about it.”

Quinn nodded, eyes on the helm. “I’m happy to have been of assistance. I don’t know what you see in her, but I’m pleased you’re happy.”

“I am. Take us to Dromund Kaas. We’ve earned some time off.”

When Quinn nodded, Jhonnen returned to Vette and took her hand, leading her back into the bedroom. He turned away and took all his jewelry off before turning back to face her. Vette curled her hands over his cheeks and pressed her mouth to his, the effect of the kiss being quite ruined when they both broke into smiles. So they were forced to try again, Jhonnen crushing her into his arms.

Vette kissed his neck and sent a thrill down his spine.

“T’d like to do more,” she said. “But I promised my mom that’d I’d be married first and it seems like that’s the only promise I’ve actually… kept.”

“That’s fine,” Jhonnen assured her. “Slow is good, slow is nice.”

It was definitely too early to start thinking about marriage. But if he wasn’t going to marry her, who in the Corellian hells was he going to marry?

“There are probably things we can do that don’t violate my promise to my mom. I intend to look into them.”

Jhonnen nodded. “I’ll just be here, grinning like an idiot.”

Vette laughed. “So nothing has changed.”

He shrugged. “Why would it change? We’re who we’ve always been, now with kisses.” He laughed. “I hope, anyway. And if you wanted to just sleep in here all the time now, I wouldn’t object. Quinn wants the engine room back anyway.”

Vette considered, tilting her head to the side like a bird, and then nodded. “I’ll probably take over
Jaesa’s old room if I’m moving rooms, just because it seems like having our own spaces might be nice or important or whatever, but yes, I’ll sleep in here more often. And you should stop sleeping on the couch in the apartment.”

Jhonnen nodded in agreement.

Vette snuggled against him, kissing his neck and chuckling when he sighed. “Man, I’m only your second kiss, aren’t I?”

“Yes. You’ve been present for all of my kisses.” He grinned at her. “Kissing you is better than kissing Cytharat, before you start trying to tease me.”

She laughed.

They returned to Dromund Kaas and almost immediately Jhonnen was drowned in requests from Dark Council members. Everyone had their own agenda, their own opinion of which fronts in the war were the most important. Jhonnen didn’t care about any of it, but with Marr’s assertion that he was the Wrath of the Empire now, Jhonnen wasn’t really free to just ignore everyone. He sat on the couch in his apartment with Quinn and Vette and went over the proposals.

It all felt like busywork while they waited for the Emperor to make his move. There was no way to know how much of what had happened on Yavin IV Marr had shared with the council. The risk was too great of someone agreeing with the Emperor and making a nuisance of themselves.

But still, it meant wading through their requests.

He could discount Ravage right away, nothing he did could be described as ‘diplomatic’ without trying to hide a smirk. Jhonnen didn’t like the implication of ‘Expansion’ particularly as Ravage’s proposal mentioned Jhonnen’s visit to Rishi. Vowrawn was still absent, dodging the Hand no doubt, with luck they would be suitably distracted now that the Emperor was… not returned but awake again. Mortis was leaving him alone mostly. Acina wanted him to guard some machine parts during a trip promising to be beset by pirates and Republic privateers. Darth Acharon wanted him to secure some test subjects.

Everyone insisted that they were going to win the war with this project. But looking at every project, none of it was worthy of the Wrath of the Empire, which told him they were trying to see him as a personal hit man, rather than their equal. After checking with Quinn that it wasn’t a terrible idea, he refused all of them.

Then Quinn left and Jhonnen ordered delivery for him and Vette and flopped over onto the couch, which was now just a couch, and set his head in her lap. Vette combed her fingers through his hair, undoing his short ponytail as she did.

“You should have said something years ago,” she chided, smiling down at him.

“I… honestly I was too worried about people seeing you as my slave or my father murdering you because I like you too much.”

“There have been a couple of years since then, Jhonny.”

He twisted and kissed her leg. “I’m sorry.”

“Was it… was it because of Kira?” Vette tried to sound nonchalant after tripping over the start of the sentence.
“No,” Jhonnen told her. “I love Kira, but I knew when we met on Ilum that there wasn’t a future there, and I cried about it. I cried about it on Makeb, but there’s only ever been you and I in this space.” He rolled onto his back so he could look up at her face.

Vette smiled at him. “It is a little difficult not to be jealous of the girl you have a Force bond with.”

He reached up and brushed her cheek with his fingers. “Force bonds aren’t everything.”
Marr kept Jhonnen busy, even as he was refusing other assignments from the Dark Council. Marr was the one person Jhonnen couldn’t just say ‘no’ to and at least it kept the days from being too samey. They were returning from one of the many front lines when Quinn pinged the intercom that there was a message for him that he was actually going to want to listen to. Jhonnen left his meditations and moved to the lounge with the holoterminal.

“No, I don’t care,” Lana said to someone Jhonnen couldn’t see. “Revoke their access. All of them! Now!”

“Lana?” Jhonnen asked.

“Lord Wrath,” she inclined her head briefly, more of a jerk then a nod. “It’s time. You must confront him. Our Former Emperor. Vitiate. He’s—” She turned away. “I don’t care what they tell you. Assume they’re lying and deal with them!” She looked back at Jhonnen. “He’s here—Vitiate’s presence, here on Ziost. He’s taking over this outpost, controlling soldiers and Sith, using them to murder anyone he can.”

“I’ll be there immediately. Can you hold out?”

“I’m sending coordinates. We’ll hold this bunker as long as we can, but you must hurry or—”

The signal fritzed out and then back in. Lana was on the ground.

“Lana!”

The signal fritzed out again and this time there was no getting it back. Jhonnen jogged to the cockpit. “Ziost,” he instructed Quinn. “And as quickly as you can make it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen paced in front of the holoterminal during the flight, intermittently trying to get a hold of Lana again and having a frustrating lack of success.

The Orbital, when they arrived, was a mess. Something bad was going on on the planet’s surface. Enough so that the shuttle they tried to charter out wasn’t having it.

“I can fly it, my lord,” said Quinn. “If he won’t.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Consider your vessel commodered,” he shrugged his shoulders. “We’ll try to bring it back for you. Vette, Quinn, let’s get down there.”

Vette and Jhonnen sat together in the passenger area. She took his hand in hers and pulled it into her lap. Jhonnen squeezed her.
Whatever it was, it wouldn’t be insurmountable with Vette at his side.

Quinn flew them to the military outpost Lana had sent coordinates too. When they landed, Jhonnen inhaled sharply with horror.

It looked like an active warzone. It looked worse than the warzone he’d just come from. Quinn and Vette drew their blasters, each standing on one side of him, ready for action. They proceeded into the outpost.

Jhonnen’s danger sense pinged. He spun, deflecting a blaster bolt back into a black uniformed body. He ground his teeth together, Lana had mentioned that Vitiate was controlling people. “Vette, Quinn, until we find Lana, everyone is assumed to be our enemy.” He extended his thoughts to shelter them. “I’m protecting you, Vitiate will have a fight on his hands if he tries to take either of you from me.”


They ducked into an abandoned vehicle bay, the source of the communication with Lana, Jhonnen thought. They searched the top floor, and then a laugh interrupted from down on the first level.

“Hello, my Wrath,” said an Imperial commando, in his own voice (but doubled and strange), not in Vitiate’s. “I foresaw your arrival, but I didn’t quite believe it.”

A woman spoke next, a soldier. “I promised on the Yavin moon that I would devour you last, and yet here you are.” She tsked. “So impatient.”

“When you’ve lived as long as I have,” this man had a lightsaber on his belt. “Patience comes far more easily—but that’s neither here nor there. I must say, I’m glad you’re here. You’ll bear witness to a world’s end if you survive long enough.”

“Focus the two soldiers,” Jhonnen said. “Leave the Force user to me.”

He moved to the ramp at the end of the floor and intercepted the Force user as he rushed up. Jhonnen fought defensively, not wanting to kill the man if there was another way to separate him from Vitiate’s consciousness. He juked hard to the side and slammed the Force into his opponent hard enough to bounce his head off the durasteel wall.

“He’s gone…” the man slumped, eyes cloudy. “I can… I can finally…” Jhonnen felt his Force signature peter out.

Jhonnen frowned, and then felt people at the entrance to the vehicle bay. He turned around and brandished his lightsabers. “More for me? You shouldn’t ha—”

Someone dropped in behind the possessed soldiers in the middle of his quip. A whirlwind of forest green and short blonde hair.

Lana!

Jhonnen smiled despite the severity of their circumstance. Lana was, if not alright, at least intact.

“So you’ve arrived. Good,” Lana said. “There’s much to be done.”

“I’m getting that,” Jhonnen agreed. “What do you need from us?”

Quinn and Vette closed ranks on either side of him.
Lana nodded to them and then fixed her eyes back on Jhonnen’s. “The Jedi you fought belonged to the Sixth Line. SIS commandos who follow their own addendum to the Jedi Code. Hence the name.”

“There is no contemplation, there is only duty,” said a man in an Imperial uniform coming up behind Lana. “Great point of view—so long as they’re working for you.” He gave a shallow bow to Lana. “Pardon the interruption. I sent a probe droid to look into that crashed shuttle, Minister Beniko. It’s empty.”

Lana gestured to the newcomer. “This is Agent Rane Kovach. He’s been something of a rising star in Sith Intelligence here on Ziost.”

Jhonnen nodded, questions vying for the top position because he figured he didn’t have time to ask all of them. “Uh… why are there SIS Jedi on Ziost?” And since when did the SIS employ Jedi in the first place?

“You can thank our friend Theron Shan for that,” Lana said with a touch of annoyance.

Agent Kovach explained in further detail. “The Sixth Line arrived when Vitiate started making moves. It’s not clear yet how Agent Shan knew to send them, but we do know he’s responsible.”

“As you’ve witnessed,” Lana said. “Vitiate is taking hold of an increasing number of soldiers and Sith. His goal continues to be the accumulation of power. Agent?”

Kovach nodded. “The dark side is strong on Ziost. Using the outposts resources, our former Emperor can massacre the defenseless to fuel him.” The more powerful he becomes, the more people he can control. He will keep on killing until nothing’s left.”

Lana touched her ear piece and frowned. “Yes, I’m on my way.” She looked up at Jhonnen (probably the only person who had to actually look up at Jhonnen. “I’m needed everywhere at once. I’ve already lingered too long. Agent Kovach has a plan to stem the bloodshed.”

She left and Agent Kovach stepped forward. “It’s an honor, my lord, here’s what I have in mind. The outpost armory is wide open right now. It’s where the possessed have been getting their firepower. It needs to be placed on lockdown.”

“Alright,” Jhonnen nodded. “Where to?”

“I’ll go out ahead, be your eyes and ears,” said Kovach, sending coordinates to Jhonnen’s datapad before leaving.

Jhonnen nodded to Quinn and Vette. “Stick close.”

“Got it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

It wasn’t a long run to the armory, Jhonnen and his companions tried to be as stealthy as possible, knowing that Vitiate was feeding on death and not wanting to contribute. Occasionally though, it couldn’t be helped. They made it inside and Jhonnen kept close to the wall, peering inside so he could count the possessed inside. He turned and nodded to Vette and Quinn. They rounded the corner together, Jhonnen providing cover for the pair of them while Vette and Quinn focused their fire on the possessed soldiers.

When they’d cleared the armory, Jhonnen had Quinn signal Agent Kovach, who ran in and started
using a console near the door.

“So how do we stop them without killing them?” Jhonnen asked. “If death is what’s fueling him.”

Kovach frowned. “We could destroy Vitiate. Not that anyone seems to know how to do that.”

Jhonnen felt someone approaching the door. A strong Force signature and not Lana Beniko.

“We’re about to have friends,” he told Kovach.

“Almost there…” Kovach said.

He got the forcefield up in time to stop a tall woman with her hair swept back.


Master Surro laughed and then spoke in the same double voice as all the other possesees. “I like this one. Strong-willed. Not that it will save her—or anyone on this world.”

“I’ve wanted to say this since Voss but, suck a whole bag of dicks, Your Eminence.”

“You are a blunt instrument.” Vitiate said, sounding mostly annoyed. “Your greatest achievement has been to bludgeon in my name. Any judgement you render is an amusement at best. When this world turns red and you choke on torrents of blood, remember that this was your chance to flee. A chance I…” Surro brought her hands up to her face. “Gave…” She arched back and screamed before collapsing to the floor. “There is no… contemplation… there is only duty!” she screamed again and fell down.

“We need to reprogram the anti-air system,” said Kovach quickly, eyeing the body of the Jedi suspiciously. “We’re wasting time here. The armory’s safe. You go ahead, I’ll be close behind.”

Outside, Quinn used the scanners to get IDs for the anti-aircraft system while Jhonnen and Vette protected him. Vette touched the inside of Jhonnen’s wrist with her fingers, and then withdrew. Just a touch, a reminder that she was with him, standing firm against the death and devastation.

They headed into the administration office where Jhonnen quickly dispatched the possessed sith lord guarding the turret controls while Quinn went around him to shut the turrets down and Vette guarded the door.

Kovach entered and checked another console. “I can confirm it: the defenses are down. Between those weapons and the armory, a lot of their killing power’s out of their hands now. Should be able to start evacuation efforts as well. The fewer potential targets on Ziost, the better.”

“Get it done,” Jhonnen said.

“Uh, Jhonnen,” Vette said from the doorway.

He turned and saw Theron Shan, bloodied and beat to hell, stroll into the room.

“The Emperor’s Wrath,” Theron said with the smallest touch of a smile. “Here on Ziost. Now. What are the odds?”

“I haven’t been the Emperor’s anything since at least Yavin and you know it,” Jhonnen crossed his arms over his chest.

“Just making sure,” Theron said.
“You know this person?”

Jhonnen nodded, more than confident that he could deal with Kovach if the Imperial Agent got uppity. “Kovach, meet Theron. Theron, Kovach.”

“Really,” Kovach said. He looked at Theron. “If you came here to save your Sixth Line, you’re too late.”

“Any chance of teaming up again?” Jhonnen asked Theron. “We could use you.”

“Sure,” Theron shrugged. “All we need to do is figure out how to knock out a guy no one can touch.”

“So that’s a no on you having any ideas on how we could actually do that.”

Theron frowned. “I do know we have to try something. That’s about it. Way things are out there, I can’t believe I made it this far. Soon as I crash-landed, the Emperor’s puppets started coming for my shuttle, just like that,” he snapped his fingers. “Maybe figured on some easy kills inside.”

“How’d you get out?”

“Did the only thing I could think of. Rigged the ship to overload, fry everything in and around it. Tried to shield myself, but still scrambled half my implants.”

“And that stopped them?”

“They went down, yeah,” Theron nodded. “Some of them got back up, but they seemed… out of it. Not possessed—dazed.”

Kovach made a low humming noise in the back of his throat and move for the console. Quinn stepped to the side. “Intrusion,” Kovach said. “Vitiate’s pawns… I have an idea.” He pushed a couple of buttons. Jhonnen heard electricity. “We should bring them inside for interrogation.

Jhonnen, Quinn and Kovach carried the two unconscious troopers into the administration office, removed their helmets, and tied them to chairs.

“Be ready for anything,” Theron cautioned.

Slowly, one of them came too. He shook his head. “That was… a nightmare. What’s…?” He looked up and saw Jhonnen, immediately ducking his head in subservience. “It’s you! My lord, I am… I don’t know what to say.”

Jhonnen severed the bonds. “Get off world. Now.”

“Y-yes my lord.” The two men took off running.

“So now we know,” said Kovach. “Shock them unconscious and the tie is severed—for a while, at least. Hit enough of them hard enough and they’ll be out a good, long while.”

“Yeah,” Theron said. “But how do we do that?”

“I have some ideas,” Kovach touched his chin in thought. “I need to consult the New Adasta municipal systems.”

“You gonna need a hand with that?” Theron asked. “Some backup?”
“No,” Kovach shook his head. “I’ll be in touch.”

He scurried off and Theron turned to Jhonnen. “Well, he seems confident. He any good?”

Jhonnen shrugged. “I’ve known him for about an hour, but Lana vouches for him.”

Theron gave a small smile. “Lana Beniko, Minister of Sith Intelligence. Who’d have thought it, right? When I met her on Manaan she was in over her head. Seemed to be.”

Jhonnen allowed himself a small chuckle. “She’s sneaky, crafty and cleverer than most people I’ve met, but I wish she were a little more… direct.”

Theron nodded. “You don’t have to tell me. My bruises still have bruises thanks to her little deception on Rishi. Still, who am I to talk?” Theron dropped his chin in shame. “I never should have sent my team here. I made a bad situation worse and now—” something beeped. Theron pulled out his comm. “And now I’ve got a priority holocall.”

He answered it without telling Jhonnen to clear out, which was a huge display of trust and Jhonnen was appropriately touched by it.

Jhonnen recognized Supreme Chancellor Saresh when she flickered into place from Theron’s datapad.

Theron frowned. “Chancellor.”

Saresh glared at him. “An off-the-books mission to Ziost. A secret team of Jedi that—I don’t even know where to start with you about them—”

“Everything’s happened so fast,” Theron said. You don’t realize—”

“No, I do realize. I realize that you declined to inform me of a prime opportunity to cripple the Empire and face the Emperor head-on.” She straightened. “We’re taking advantage of the chaos on Ziost, starting with New Adasta. I expect your cooperation.”

“Wait,” Theron pleaded. “Please, before you send the order—”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Saresh pursed her lips in annoyance. “There’s nothing to argue. Our ships are in orbit. The invasion’s already begun.”

The call ended and Theron went to pinch the bridge of his nose and then hissed in pain as he compressed a flowering bruise. “Shit.”

“She seems like a pleasure to work for.”

“Well at least she’s just getting people killed instead of killing them herself,” Theron said. “Unlike some bosses I could mention.”

Jhonnen shrugged. “There’s no shame in admitting it now, the Emperor has terrified me since I first met him and, just to make my life story a little bit more transparent for you, I wasn’t always an Imperial citizen.”

Theron nodded. “I know. I did my research after we met.”

“My lord,” said Quinn. “Might I suggest reminiscing later? We should make haste to New Adasta. We should hurry and see that the shuttle has been left unmolested by The Emperor’s forces.”
Jhonnen nodded. “Theron are you coming with us or…”

“We should travel separately. I’ll be there.”

“Right.”

Jhonnen, Quinn and Vette hurried out of the Administration building and back to the shuttle they’d commandeered from the orbital station.

As they traveled, Jhonnen’s datapad beeped and he read a message from Marr expressing that he was aware of the situation and that he would not be sending reinforcements. Jhonnen tucked his datapad away.

“How far out are we?” Jhonnen asked.

Quinn replied. “Twenty minutes. My lord may I express some… concerns with our new allies.”

Jhonnen sighed. “Theron fucked up but I know we can trust him.”

“Indeed, Theron Shan is not the person I am concerned about, my lord.” Quinn paused for a moment and continued when he was certain Jhonnen had nothing to say. “Since we began working with him, Agent Kovach has referred to you with expected deference exactly once. He showed no signs of unease when being introduced to a high ranking member of the SIS. Individually, either of these traits might be ignored, together, they concern me.”

Jhonnen… hadn’t noticed either of these things. “What, uh, what do you suggest we do?”

Quinn was quiet for a moment. “Be on the lookout for betrayal, my lord. Do not let your guard down.”

“I’ll keep him safe,” Vette promised. “I’m more observant anyway.”

Jhonnen considered being offended and then set his head on her shoulder instead. “Meanie,” he muttered.

She turned her head and kissed the top of his.

When they landed in New Adasta, Jhonnen instructed Quinn to fly the shuttle somewhere safe and protect it because they needed their ride.

Jhonnen and Vette headed into New Adasta, navigating through the possessed Imperial and Republic groups. Vitiate was a child slamming his toys together until they broke.

“Saresh has her forces all over New Adasta,” Theron said in Jhonnen’s ear. “Doesn’t matter how bad things get. We have to put an end to Vitiate’s plan.”

Vitiate’s plan. His plan was mindless destruction but that seemed… inelegant. Out of character for Vitiate. The death was a means to an end. So what was the end?

Power.

The end was power. Because the most powerful person—thing—in the galaxy hadn’t had a large enough slice.

He thought about Nathema, the official story was that the sith lords had willinging given their lives for him. But what if they hadn’t? What if it had been like this? What if every life on Nathema had
been forced to butcher one another?

He and Vette broke into the central district of New Adasta, keeping together with Jhonnen shielding her and trying to shield Quinn even as far away as he was.

What if it wasn’t enough? What if Quinn got possessed and Vitiate got him killed. What if—

“Quinn’ll be fine,” Vette said. “If you worry too much you won’t focus on what we need to do.”

Jhonnen nodded. They had to get this finished. Then everyone would be safe.

“This is Lana,” Lana said in his ear. “Agent Kovach may have been hurt, possibly worse. I haven’t heard from him, and his tracker’s off.”

“I’m heading for the electrical substation,” Jhonnen said, touching his ear piece. “Maybe he’s there.”

It was the logical place for him to be heading, given what they knew.

Vette stuck close behind him, both blasters up to protect them from flanking assaults as she and Jhonnen hurried to the substation.

He stood guard while Vette figured out how to turn off the power. With the power off, Jhonnen and Vette ventured deeper into the substation.

Kovach’s voice echoed through what had been the electrical humming. “I tried to reach you, to tell you—this won’t end well.”

“The time for hand-wringing ended when you shut down the Orbital Defense Command Center, Agent,” said Saresh of all people.

Jhonnen and Vette slowed their footsteps. Quinn had been right about Kovach. Of course, if Jhonnen told Quinn that, Kovach would be dead.

But… he should tell Lana anyway. Lana was his… not his friend but his ally. And Kovach had apparently been responsible for the Republic showing up and mucking things up.

Jhonnen wondered if Theron knew about Kovach, and if Theron knew that Kovach was working for Saresh.

This was… a lot.

“With respect,” Kovach said. “You haven’t seen what I have on the ground. The power the Emperor holds—”

“I’m aware, Agent. Now, if you have a report on Sith Intelligence or SIS, we can talk. But you will not tell me how to fight a war.”

The call ended and Jhonnen heard Kovach sigh. “This is bad.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen agreed. “This is bad.” He and Vette turned the corner.

Kovach folded his hands “I take it you heard all that. Or enough of it.”

“Yes,” Jhonnen said again. “You know, Lana trusts you. She called you her ‘rising star’.”
“I know this looks bad,” Kovach said. He sighed again. “Okay, it is bad. But listen, I have a plan to stall Vitiate’s progress—at least for a while. It requires that we work together. Let me help you.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Alright, what do we need to do?”

“I need you to release the dampner lock and power down the dampners.” Kovach gestured to a smaller room.

“So what are you going to do about Kovach?” Vette asked when they were alone, her fingers working quickly over the release console.

Jhonnen sighed. “I… don’t know. On the one hand I should tell Lana. Not for the Empire but because she’s my ally and she deserves to know that someone is betraying her. If I do that, he’s dead. Also if Lana finds out that I knew and didn’t tell her, she’ll never trust me again.”

Not that Lana had a leg to stand on after the Theron mess, but she’d never done anything similar to Jhonnen.

“That sucks.”

“Yeah,” Jhonnen nodded. “Makes me wish we’d been about five minutes later so I didn’t have to deal with it.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m… gonna tell Lana. Her trust is more important.”

“But he’ll die.”

Jhonnen frowned. “I know. But he’s also responsible for Saresh’s troops being here making everything worse.”

“Okay,” said Agent Kovach. “I’ve placed the dampeners on manual. I’ll be controlling them while you alter the makeup of the grid. Once it’s all set, we’ll put a shock into every living thing in New Adasta.”

“Except us,” Jhonnen said.

There was no answer.

Jhonnen sighed.

When they powered down the second dampner, Lana’s voice crackled into Jhonnen’s ear. “Finally heard from Agent Kovach. He says you’re working together on a solution. More and more of our forces have fallen to Vitiate. It’s spreading beyond the city now, along with the war. There must be an end to this. Excuse me, my attention is needed elsewhere. Everywhere.”

Jhonnen felt worse about even thinking about not telling her.

They disabled a third dampner and then headed out to disable the system failsafe, keeping close to walls and slinking through the city as best they could.

“Maybe you don’t want to hear this,” Kovach said in Jhonnen’s ear. “I have to say it though. I respect Lana Beniko—sincerely. But the Empire enslaves and slaughters innocent people every day, and I respect common decency more. I hope you understand.”

Jhonnen did understand. That’s what made this so difficult. He agreed even, but he didn’t need to be in hot water with a woman who should have been one of his closest allies.
But he was going to feel scummy about it.

He didn’t even like the Empire.

But he liked Lana despite it all, and he needed Lana to trust him, and Lana deserved better than to be lied to.

Simplistic virtues, but they were the virtues Jhonnen had.

Jhonnen and Vette headed into the small building that held the failsafe controls. Jhonnen felt it before he saw it and caught Vette’s arm, pulling her back behind him as something massive and grey dropped through the roof.

“What is that?” Vette asked.

“I don’t know,” Jhonnen said. “But I’m pretty certain it needs to die.”

He launched himself forward to get the thing’s attention and then rolled to the side to dodge one of the creature’s massive fists. He slashed out with both lightsabers and severed a massive hand at the wrist. The creature roared and slapped him with the stump, sending him crashing into a wall.

“Jhonnen!” Vette fired at the creature trying to draw it away from Jhonnen as he shook himself from dazed.

He charged back into the fight, leaping and driving both lightsabers through the beast’s back, right next to the prestigious spikes on its spine. The monster lurched and fell forward onto his face.

Vette looked at Jhonnen, eyes scanning over him for injury before she scampered past to the failsafe controls. “What the fuck was that?” Vette asked.

“We’ve been calling them monoliths,” the console flickered and Lana appeared. “I promise I wasn’t eavesdropping. Just wanted to warn you. We’ve seen several of those creatures throughout New Adasta. They’re made from Sith alchemy. A sign of Vitiate’s growing power.”

“Well that’s no good,” Jhonnen said.

Lana nodded. “Extremely strong, next to impossible to kill. The one you just defeated is the smallest we’ve come across.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Look, I don’t want to do this, but we need to talk about Kovach.”

“It’ll have to wait,” Lana pointed. “Behind you.”

Jhonnen turned as the defeated monolith started to pick itself up. It grabbed its severed hand and reattached it by touching it to its wrist. It roared and Jhonnen lunged carving into it with his lightsabers. None of his strikes seemed to do anything. He dodged the massive hands and teeth.

“Jhonnen!” Vette shouted. “Duck!”

Jhonnen threw himself on the ground as a buzz became the crack of lightning. He rolled out of the way as the monolith hit the ground. Standing up, Jhonnen drove his lightsaber through the monolith’s eye, just to make himself feel better, and then gave Vette a smile. “You’re a wonder,” he told her. “That was brilliant.”

“I’m just glad you ducked when I told you too.” Vette smiled back, her smile drying up quickly. “This is all insane.”
Jhonnen nodded. “We should call Quinn and make sure he’s—”

“Plans over,” Kovach said as he entered the room. “Scrapped. Some giant thing tore through a junction caused an electrical surge. Dampners are shot.”

Jhonnen exhaled. “So we need a new plan and you need to get free of Ziost before I tell Lana about our earlier chat.”

Kovach stared at him. “You still need me.”

“If you stay, she is going to kill you,” Jhonnen said.

Kovach held his head high and Jhonnen sighed in response. He didn’t understand noble sacrifices. A lot of the time they seemed unnecessary.

“Look, you brought Saresh into this mess,” Jhonnen scowled. “Even if Lana weren’t going to be mad about the treachery—which she is, I’ve seen her go after traitors—she’ll kill you in the name of efficiency.”

Kovach seemed to falter for a minute and then held his head up again. “If there’s any way for me to fix this, I have to try.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Alright.”

“I thought about an electrical bombardment from space, but it would be incredibly imprecise. We’d be as likely to kill a lot of people as anything. Besides, the two fleets have engaged one another. Maybe if we convinced Saresh or Darth Marr to divert some forces…” He pulled out his comm and a tiny Lana (well, tinier) flickered into his palm.

“Agent, report,” she said.

“It won’t work, Minister. I failed.”

Jhonnen exhaled. “If you don’t tell her, I will have to.” He felt like a grade A mother fucker.

“Minister Beniko. I… I place myself at your mercy.”

Jhonnen wasn’t sure what good that was going to do.

“Spit it out, Agent. We haven’t all day.”

Kovach swallowed hard. “I don’t work for you. I answer to the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. I’m sorry.”


Jhonnen froze. He didn’t want to be the one to kill Kovach he wanted Kovach to have fled before they got to this point. He was faced with two options, kill Kovach or let Kovach go in front of the furious Minister.

Jhonnen closed his eyes and ignited his lightsaber. He drove it through the left side of Kovach’s chest, killing him instantly.

“Jhonny,” Vette said gently.

Jhonnen swallowed. “Sorry, Kovach.”
He produced his own communicator and called Lana back. She looked mollified, the death having cleared her thoughts. “Now, let’s move on. I have another plan. A better plan. However, it’s not without a great deal of risk.”

“Well what has been without a great deal of risk?” Jhonnen said, trying not to look at Kovach’s corpse.

“War has broken out across the globe,” Lana explained. “Our former Emperor, however, has limited his involvement to the area around New Adasta, near you.”

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence. It’s possible he isn’t as strong as he’s been letting on. It’s possible he’s worried about what you could do.”

“Then we need to figure out ‘what I can do’ that might be making him nervous,” Jhonnen said. “Because he was right about my being kind of a bludgeoning weapon.”

“You’re more than you realize,” Lana said, he thought her tone gentled for a moment. “You must get all of his pawns—every last soldier, Jedi and Sith—to chase you into the heart of New Adasta. You must make Vitiate want to kill you. Now.”

Jhonnen turned of his comm and turned to Vette. “I need you to get back to the Orbital,” he told her. “Now.”

“I’m not going to just leave you,” Vette said firmly.

“Vette, if he focuses his attention on you, I don’t know if I can keep you safe. He doesn’t share, he subsumes.”

Vette stepped into him. She grabbed a fistful of his shirt and hauled him up into her mouth. “We’re doing this together,” she said, letting go of him. “I swear Jhonnen one of these days you’ll stop trying to send me away.”

Jhonnen gave her a sheepish look. “I just want you to be safe, Vette. I love you.”

“I love you too, but I’ve been in danger since we met, I’m fine.”

He sighed. “Yes, dear.”

She didn’t say anything about Kovach, even though he knew she didn’t approve. He took strength in that, trusting that Vette knew he had his reasons, and that she was trusting his reasons were good ones.

He called Quinn. “Quinn?”

“My lord. We’ve had several of Vitiate’s possessed forces attempt to board the shuttle. I was forced into the air to avoid them.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Vette and I are heading into the center of New Adasta, but I need to you see if you can sabotage the war effort, both sides, just make it harder for them to kill one another.”

“Yes, my lord.”
“Thanks, Quinn. And stay safe. If you start feeling your thoughts cloud head back to the Orbital immediately. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Jhonnen hung up and looked back at Vette. “Let’s move.”
The Icy Grip Of The Inevitable

Chapter Summary

Jhonnen enters the role he was born for: Pissing off the most powerful sith lord in the galaxy.

People’s tower was a large spire sticking out of the center of New Adasta and it seemed to be the focal point of Vitiate’s activity. The streets were filled with the sound of blaster fire, but other than that it was deathly quiet. There were no screams any longer, and the possessed didn’t talk amongst themselves.

Blaster fire and boots were the only sounds.

Jhonnen and Vette did their best to sneak through. Jhonnen’s hand itched for hers, for the physical reminder that she was there, but he needed both hands on his lightsabers and she needed both hands on her blasters so he settled for regularly turning his head to make sure she was there as they moved towards the tower like Lana had instructed.

They cleared out the first level of the tower. Jhonnen felt guilty killing Vitiate’s pawns. They hadn’t done anything, they weren’t really responsible and every death fueled Vitiate a little bit more. But it couldn’t be helped. Jhonnen and Vette needed to move fast and that meant there wasn’t time to try not to kill anyone.

Using a stolen rocket launcher, Vette blasted open the door to the access tunnels so they could get higher in the tower, hopefully with fewer if Vitiate’s minions in the way. She dropped the launcher and headed in, Jhonnen following after her and then they awkwardly traded positions so he was in front.

The access tunnel opened into a full room of durasteel pipes and wiring. Jhonnen and Vette again tried to creep through without being noticed, but were forced to fight again and again, working their way back to the lift system, which had been sabotaged.

Jhonnen studied the lift shaft. “Vette?”

“Yeah?”

“Hold onto me.” He turned and she climbed onto his back. Hooking his arms under her legs, Jhonnen gathered the Force around his legs and leapt. He angled to jump from one side of the shaft to the other, bouncing up to the next floor.

“Before we go ahead with this,” Lana said in his ear. “You and I should talk—in person. I’ll see you shortly.”

Jhonnen hoped she was right. Lana was a skilled combatant, but there was a lot of resistance around the tower. Though hopefully, by the time she got there, there would be less resistance within it.

Vette pressed a kiss to the back of Jhonnen’s head and slid off his back. They proceeded forwards and then ducked back behind a wall as blaster bolts flew close to where their heads had been.
“Was that a turret?” Jhonnen asked in a hissed voice.

Vette nodded.

“Who the fuck sets up turrets in a maintenance shaft?”

“Vitiate,” Vette volunteered. “Also Imps are just generally grumpy and paranoid. Look at Quinn.”

Jhonnen smiled despite himself. “Quinn isn’t that paranoid.”

Vette made it all less terrifying. She made even the worst situations less bad.

And he was probably going to get her killed or possessed.

Great.

Jhonnen dove out of cover and deflected the turret’s fire back at it, close the distance so he could slice through the durasteel and render the turret into scrap.

Then he and Jhonnen continued

The only blessing as Jhonnen and Vette worked their way through the second floor of the People’s Tower, was that the possessed were as content to shoot at each other as they were to shoot at Jhonnen and Vette when they saw them.

“You’ve made it,” Lana said as Jhonnen finished clearing the security office because he really didn’t want Vitiate’s pawns in charge of any security systems. “Time is short—so is reliable assistance. As Agent Kovach is no longer in the picture, I’ve taken the liberty of reaching out to someone I hope we can trust a little better.” She tapped something on the security console and a little holo of Theron popped up. “Are you in position?”

“Yeah,” said Theron. “But this setup isn’t anything like what you’ve described.”

“So what you’re saying is you can’t figure it out,” Lana said sharply.

Theron scowled at her. “Don’t get all—I’ll figure it out.”

“We’re about to begin, so that would be nice.”

“Begin what, exactly?” Jhonnen asked.

Lana turned to face him. “You’re going to make Vitiate angry. So angry that he’ll place all his attention on killing you. When the time comes, you’ll lead him to an electrostatic weapon stored here, in the heart of New Adasta.”

Jhonnen blinked at her.

“It’s meant to be a last resort against major civil uprisings, but Theron’s modifying it to be non-lethal. With the reduced charge, its radius of impact will diminish.”

Jhonnen hated the Empire. He figured the Republic probably didn’t have electrostatic weapons in the middle of their cities to “pacify” uprisings.

Of course, the Republic was famously corrupt and the Jedi (with the exceptions of Kira and Katsulas) had that whole ‘ethnic cleansing’ of sith purebloods going on.
And the Hutts were their own brand of fucked up.

He thought about his dream, being a free trader with Vette, and then sighed. “We should get started then.”

“Yes,” Lana nodded. “Let’s.”

She set up the console to broadcast throughout the city and set up the holo so it was pointing at Jhonnen. He folded his arms over his chest and tried to look confident and scary, the little lessons his father had given him.

“Hiya,” he said. “Gotta say, I’m pretty disappointed. For all that you pretend to be all powerful and all knowing, you seem perfectly satisfied to smash your toys together like a spoiled child. I was nervous at first, but now I know you’re just a coward. You can’t do anything to me. You keep playing with your toys Vishy, you know where I am if you want to try something a bit tougher.”

The call ended and Jhonnen sagged. “So, he’d definitely going to kill me.”

Vette touched his arm. “That was good. You did good.”

Lana nodded. “I have to go now. There’s much to be done. Too much. I shouldn’t have come here, truth be told.”

Jhonnen gave her a serious look. “Lana. Breathe. You can do this.”

“Thank you,” she tried to give him a smile but it didn’t meet her yellow eyes. “We’ll see if you’re right. Theron’s on the top floor waiting for you.”

Lana left and Jhonnen and Vette headed out of the security office to try and find the lift that would take them to the top of the tower.

“Hey,” Theron said in Jhonnen’s ear.

“Hey,” Jhonnen replied.

“That was… awkward. Not as bad as my previous chat with her, believe it or not.”

“Given as you’re on an Imperial planet you’re not supposed to be on, with a bunch of Jedi that aren’t supposed to be here, I believe your first conversation with Lana was much much worse.” Jhonnen dropped his voice to a whisper and hugged a wall, watching a small group of possessed march past.

“About those Jedi,” Theron took a breath. “I know killing Jedi is kind of a thing for you, but the Sixth Line… It’s because of me they’re here in the first place. If you could find some way—any way at all—just… please help them. Don’t do the other thing.”

Jhonnen nodded despite knowing Theron couldn’t see him. “I’m not killing anyone I don’t have to kill. With luck this plan’ll work and we’ll get your people home safe.”

“Thanks, Jhonnen.”

Jhonnen and Vette continued on and blasted out one of the decorative windows so they could climb along the shoulders of the massive Sith statue in the People’s Tower lobby. Vette tossed a grenade at the far window to bust it open and then climbed onto Jhonnen’s back. He held her legs, took a breath and jumped, coiling the Force around his legs and leapt. He hit the edge of the sill and
started to teeter backwards, Vette making him back heavy. Jhonnen reached out and grabbed the wall with the Force, pulling himself forward and taking a few steps before letting Vette down.

“That, was terrifying,” she told him.

Jhonnen nodded his agreement.

A little further up they found two Jedi Masters in a room that hummed with electricity.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing?” said Vitiate in the voice of the twi’lek master.

“Of course I know, my righteous Wrath,” he said in the voice of the miralen master. “I know everything.”

“And I will enjoy watching you fail.”

Jhonnen ignited his lightsabers. Two Jedi Masters, neither of which he wanted to kill, and Vette, who he needed to keep alive. This was going to be... tough.

But Vitiate was arrogant, he wouldn’t see Vette as a threat. He would see her as a slave. Jhonnen could use that.

He launched himself forward. As the twi’lek master brought his lightsaber up to block, Jhonnen unignited his lightsaber and punched the man in the nose. Probably the puppets didn’t feel pain any more, but that didn’t mean the eyes wouldn’t water.

He rolled out of the way as the miralen master tried to slice at him and kicked her in the stomach, sending her backwards.

“Knees!” he shouted.

Vette took aim.

The puppets fought recklessly with no thought for defense. Any death served Vitiate. This let him occupy both lightsabers while Vette got a couple of good shots in and shattered two kneecaps, forcing the puppets to kneel.

“Go ahead,” said Vitiate. “Kill them. Kill the Jedi.”

“If you let them live, they will just keep murdering in my name. Don’t hesitate.”

“Kill them. I won’t mind—and neither will your Republic friend.”

“Vette,” Jhonnen said. “Get off the grating.”

“What are you doing?” demanded Vitiate. “This is not the act of a proper Sith lord!”

Jhonnen grinned. “Nope!”

When they were both safely off the grating, Jhonnen used the Force to blast the safeties. A torrent of electricity surged and shocked both Jedi masters unconscious. Jhonnen gathered Vette in his arms, scooping her up, and leapt over the grating. “They’ll have a nasty headache when they wake up,” Jhonnen said. “But at least they’ll wake up.” He set Vette down and they walked into the lift.

“I think you’re enjoying this a little,” Vette said.
“Not the death and the implications, but its… freeing… to tell Vitiate to fuck off,” Jhonnen admitted. “It’s like it’s the… natural end to my cycle of wanting to tell the Sith in charge of me to fuck off. My dad, the overseers, Baras, now Vitiate.”

“What about Marr?”

“I am still too scared of Marr to tell him to fuck off,” Jhonnen admitted as they ascended. “He’s… scary.”

“Scarier than the Emperor?”

Jhonnen nodded. “The Emperor mostly left me alone, Marr knows where I live.”

They reached the top of People’s Tower and met Theron.

Theron looked up and gave Jhonnen a greeting nod before turning his attention back to what he was working on. He took a step back. “That’s it. Got it set for a big a non-lethal burst as we can manage. Should be enough to zap anyone in range into a nice, long, involuntary nap.”

“I’m not loving the sound of should be,” Vette said.

Theron gave her a shrug. “Hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all solution. Lot of guesswork involved. Wish there was some way we could do a test run.”

“They’re probably closing in,” Jhonnen said.

Theron nodded. “Then come on. We need to be shielded.” He moved to the far back of the platform and set up a portable shielding device. “Okay,” he said once they were all three inside the shield. “We should wait until they’re good and close.”

Jhonnen nodded. “Also, in case we all die, it’s been nice seeing you. Even if the situation is pretty fucking terrible.”

“Same here,” Theron told him. “Beats how I imagined our next meeting—aside from the part where we’re fighting two armies possessed by a crazy Sith lord.” He looked at Jhonnen for a moment. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Jhonnen shrugged.

“Yeah,” Vette said with the hint of a laugh. “He’s pretty comfortable with being a crazy Sith lord.”

“Oh yes,” Jhonnen rolled his eyes. “Me and my schemes and plans and torture of the innocent. You never know what I’m going to murder next.”

Vette snorted. “Darth Bunny slippers.”

Theron looked past them to the door. “Okay, here comes the puppet brigade. Fingers crossed.” He pushed a button and the air crackled with electricity. Jhonnen took a step closer to Vette, like he could shield her if things went wrong. Vette curled her hand around his, just for a moment, as the door from the lift burst open and then people were struck with lightning, falling over where they were.

Theron left the shield to check the nearest body. “This one was closet, took the biggest hit.” He checked the woman’s pulse and then stood back, clapping once. “Still alive. We did it!” He turned to Jhonnen and Vette. “Let’s just hope we got all of them. We should call Lana now, see if she has
a plan for what’s next.”

“I have a better idea,” said Vitiate in Master Surro’s voice. Jhonnen looked past Theron as nine of the bodies on the floor rose up, levitated by the Force with a strength Surro herself should not have possessed.

“Master Surro.” Theron said. “No.”

“Watching you believe you had a chance, it’s amused me,” said Vitiate. “Now this whole charade is pathetic.” He ignited Surro’s lightsaber. “Now, how do you wish to die? In combat or on your knees?”

Jhonnen saw something move behind Surro, a whirl of forest green. Lana struck at Surro only for Vitiate to block and spin, slamming Lana back into a wall.

“Go away little Sith.”

Theron, Jhonnen and Vette surged forward but Theron out paced them with his long legs and dropped a shield, trapping Jhonnen and Vette.

Vitiate lifted Theron and curled Surro’s fist like he was going to crush him before tossing Theron hard into a pillar.

Theron hit the ground and didn’t move.

“This has nothing to do with your friends,” Vitiate said. “This is you and I.”

“And Surro,” Jhonnen said. “You’re still in there. Fight him!”

Surro’s mouth moved into a cruel smile. “Your words are as desperate as they are useless. And they will be your last.”

“You know, assuming I don’t talk while we’re fighting,” Jhonnen said, igniting both of his lightsabers. He waited for Surro to come to him, and Vitiate did not disappoint, leaping forward recklessly. Jhonnen defended until he saw a good opportunity and swept one of his opponent’s legs out. When Surro hit the floor, Jhonnen kicked her in the head as hard as he could, trying to knock her out.

Vitiate flung him into a wall, but Jhonnen curled at the last moment, protecting his head from collision. His back screamed in protest as both shoulder blades connected with the metal pillar.

“Fuck off!” Vette shouted, firing at Vitiate.

Jhonnen’s heart dropped into his stomach. He curled the Force around Vette’s waist and pulled her towards him.

“Parasite,” growled Vitiate.

Jhonnen launched himself back towards Master Surro, trying to occupy all of Vitiate’s attention.

“I think I’ll kill her first,” Vitiate said. “How angry can I make my Wrath?”

Jhonnen gnashed his teeth together. “Pretty fucking angry,” He kicked Surro hard in the knee and heard a crunch. He twisted the Force around both of her wrists and snapped them.

Surro hit the ground.
Jhonnen kept his lightsaber pointed at her as Lana and Theron picked themselves up and made their way over.

“I saw it…” Surro said weakly. “I saw everything. Every life. Every life he took—I took. It’s all I can see any more. I’m a monster."

Theron knelt down beside her. “That’s not true—you’ll be okay. I’ll take you to Tython. The Jedi will help you restore your mind, make you whole again.”

Lana clicked her tongue. “And then she’ll be no good to us. We need to understand the connection Vitiate established with this Jedi so we can stop it or exploit it.”

“Yeah,” Theron sneered. “And let me guess—the process is invasive. Hasn’t she been through enough?”

“We’ve bought ourselves some time—that’s all,” Lana insisted. “We can’t risk the fate of the galaxy just to assuage your guilt.”

“You want to take her brain apart and you don’t even know if you’ll find anything!”

Jhonnen cleared his throat. “Lana, I appreciate that you’re the most pragmatic person I’ve ever met, but I’ve seen enough suffering for one day. Master Surro should be allowed to return to Tython. It’s possible that in rehabilitating her, the Jedi will discover the nature of her link to Vitiate.”

“You’re joking,” Lana said. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“You heard him,” Theron said acidically. He helped Surro to standing and braced her so she could hobble despite her broken knee. “Come on, I’ll get you shipped out of here as soon as I can.” He helped her leave.

Lana turned to Jhonnen. She scowled. “I suppose we can be grateful that we managed some manner of progress.”

Jhonnen nodded.

“You know, Vitiate gave up on trying to take control of me some time ago. Perhaps he’s not as powerful as we were led to believe. Still,” she shook her head. “He is more than formidable. We’ve only stopped him temporarily, and war still rages. We have much to do.”

They started headed down to the lobby together. Lana put a hand to her ear. “Darth Marr would like very much to speak with you,” she said. “There’s a holoterminal in the lobby.”

When they reached the ground floor, Lana left.

Vette curled her hand around Jhonnen’s elbow and stopped him from walking ahead. “Hey,” she said. “Are you doing alright? Today has been a lot.”

He turned to face her and closed his eyes and Vette’s hands came up to feather his cheeks. He looked down at the floor and she kissed his forehead.

“I wish you would have waited on the Orbital,” he confessed. “When Vitiate noticed you—I thought that was it.”

She pulled away from his forehead and gave him a small smile. “We’re a good team, Jhonny. It’ll
take more than the Emperor to fuck this up.”

He gave her an adoring smile. “I love you, but I’m like ninety-percent certain you’re out of your mind.”

Vette laughed. “You bring it out in me.”

They held hands on the way to the holoterminial and dropped them as Jhonnen dialed Darth Marr. He managed to get a visual, but the audio was jumpy and distorted. Someone must have put up a signal blocker.

He might get a better signal from the Orbital.

“I’m curious.” Vitiate’s voice echoed through the room. Do you really believe you’ve accomplished anything here? What do you think you’ve stopped?"

“Does it matter?” Jhonnen asked. “Even if it’s futile, trying to stop you is the right thing to do. What good am I to anyone if I don’t try?”

“Indeed—what good are you?” Vitiate mocked. “It is a question I have asked myself—and have finally answered. I have decided that life is more interesting with you in it. If you wish to keep railing against me, then so be it. Your interference changes nothing. When I am finished here—when every life on this world has been exhausted—I want you to be alive. To know that I succeeded. Goodbye.”

Vette stepped into Jhonnen as Vitiate stopped speaking. “We should probably tell Lana about that.”

Jhonnen nodded and produced his comm. “Lana, meet me on the Orbital. We have to talk about things.”

Leaving People’s Tower, Jhonnen and Vette found a shuttle. Vette slid into the pilot’s seat and Jhonnen dialed Quinn.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

Quinn frowned delicately. “The war is progressing, I’ve been doing what I can, but it isn’t much. There’s little evidence of the Emperor’s control here.”

“Right, that’s something at least. Meet Vette and I back on the Orbital so we can work out the next step of this… war… thing.”

“At once, my lord. My shuttle needs to be refueled, but I should have that done shortly.”

Once aboard the Orbital, Jhonnen received a message from Darth Marr informing him that the order to evacuate Ziost had been given. Which was a relief, Vitiate’s influence hadn’t been felt on the Orbital, so getting people as far from Ziost as possible seemed like the only thing to do.

He watched Ziost out of one of the massive transparisteel windows on the Orbital. It looked peaceful. It looked…

Ice formed a fist around his heart and started to squeeze. He felt it through the Force, familiar and cold.

His mother’s death had left a cold spot in him because he’d been linked with her at the moment of
her death. This was that but so much bigger. He put a hand on the transparisteel and stared down at Ziost as a dust storm swept across the surface. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think.

Just looking at the planet he knew, no one had survived. There had been no shelter. No plant life had survived even. Vitiate had drained the whole planet of vitality.

“Jhonny?”

His eyes shot open. Quinn.

Quinn had been on the surface, refueling his shuttle. Jhonnen fell to his knees. He usually sent Quinn off after secondary objectives. This was on him. If they’d stayed together, Quinn would be fine. He’d be standing next to Vette, watching Vitiate suck the life out of an entire planet.

Jhonnen’s shoulders shook and he hiccuped with the force of trying not to sob.

Vette squeezed his shoulder. “Jhonny, what… why is the planet turning grey?”

Jhonnen swallowed, the ice stuck in his throat. “Dead,” he spat out. “E-everyone’s dead.” He swiped furiously at his eyes. “Vitiate’s killed everything on the planet. People, animals, plants, I can… I can almost hear them screaming.”

Vette’s hand on his shoulder squeezed harder, almost to bruising.

Jhonnen looked down at his knees, at the damp spots from where the tears kept torrenting off his nose.

“Quinn…” his throat was tight and the word strained. “He was refueling. He didn’t… I should have kept him with us. I got him killed.”

“Not quite, my lord.” Quinn said.

Jhonnen whipped his head up. He stood quickly and spun around. Quinn was there, his expression frowning and unhappy, but he seemed intact.

“Malavai!” Jhonnen lunged forward and wrapped both of his arms around his friend, nose pressed to Quinn’s jacket, tears staining the fabric.

Tensely, Quinn wrapped his arms around Jhonnen and gave his back an awkward pat.

Jhonnen pulled away. “I thought I’d gotten you killed.”

“I apologize for worrying you, my lord.”

Jhonnen took a deep breath. He wiped his eyes, and contacted Lana. The few seconds before she answered stretched into an eternity. He relaxed a little when she answered. “Lana, did you see—”

“Yes,” Lana answered. “Meet me at Vaiken Spacedock, the room where we met.”

Jhonnen nodded and hung up. He started walking to the hangar where The Sanguine Tide was waiting, Quinn and Vette on his heels.

Quinn took them away from Ziost, and as the planet got further and further away, Jhonnen began to feel more like himself. He contacted Theron from the holoterminal in the lounge, just be to sure his friend and survived, and then he collapsed on the sofa.
Vette sat down next to him. “Hey,” she said. “Hey look at me.”

Jhonnen obeyed.

She wiped his tears away with her fingers and then leaned into kiss him. “How can I help?”

Jhonnen gave her a weak smile. “Honestly, the fact that you’re in one piece is enough.”

She smiled at him. “I think I always knew you’d cry over Quinn, but I was never really expecting to see it.”

“I like Quinn,” Jhonnen said with a small shrug. “I always have. That’s why I didn’t want to believe… well… you remember.”

“Just makes me think I need to take good care of myself. If you’d cry like that over Quinn I’d hate to see what’d happen if I died.”

Jhonnen barked a hollow laugh. “There would be no tears Vette, not at first. Just single-minded destruction of whatever killed you. Then there would be crying. Lots of crying.”

She hugged him and Jhonnen scooped her onto his lap to hug her more tightly, pressing his forehead to her collarbone.

His people were safe.

Everything was terrible, and it would be a long time before he felt alright, but his people were safe, and that was enough for now.

Vette and Quinn went to resupply when they docked at Vaiken Spacedock. Jhonnen headed down the levels to the room where he’d first met Lana and found her there, staring at an image of Ziosk.

She turned and looked at him. “I take it you’ve heard about Ziosk.”

“I saw it,” Jhonnen said. “Watched the planet turn grey.”

“It was a blur,” Lana looked back at the image. “We tried to evacuate as many as we could. Considering so much was out of control, I’d say we did all right…” she shook her head. “But Vitiate is stronger now. Sith Intelligence is in complete disarray. It’s all coming apart.”

“Breathe,” Jhonnen said. “You did the best you could with what you had and you did better than anyone else would have in your shoes.”

“I have to learn from this,” Lana said. “From my mistakes—but I don’t intend to wallow, if that’s your concern.” She looked around the room. “When Darth Arkous asked for my counsel, I considered turning him down. I wanted understanding, not a place in the power structure. But that’s where I am. I don’t take the responsibility lightly.” She squared her thin shoulders. “Whatever comes my way, I will deal with it.”

He gave her a very thin smile. “I know, it’s part of what makes you a force of nature.”

She returned his thin smile with one of her own. “Thank you, my Lord.” She looked back up at the image of Ziosk and her smile died. “Especially after Ziosk, putting an end to Vitiate’s threat feels like an impossible task. I don’t believe it is truly impossible. Even if it were, we have to try.”

“Optimism? From you?” Jhonnen teased.
“It would appear so,” she gave him one of her small, mysterious smiles. “Imagine that.” She pushed a few buttons and the image of Ziost disappeared. “Well—the Republic are licking their wounds, same as us, but they aren’t relenting. And they are hardly our only concern. I suppose I should go about looking after the security of the Sith Empire. Unless there was anything else?”

Jhonnen shook his head. “I’m here if you need me.”

She nodded her head. “I know. May the Force ever serve you.”

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